

"Two weeks ago I bought a 'Joan the Wad' and to-day I have won £232 10s. Please send two more."

—B. C., Tredegar, S. Wales.

Extract from "Everybody's Fortune Book," 1931.



JOAN the WAD

is the

Lucky Cornish Piskey

who

Sees All; Hears All; Does All

JOAN THE WAD is Queen of the Lucky Cornish Piskeys. Thousands of persons all

over the world claim that Joan the Wad has brought them Wonderful Luck in the way of Health, Wealth and Happiness.

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If you will send me your name and address and a 1 - stamp and a stamped addressed envelope for reply, I will send you a History of the Cornish Piskey Folk, and the marvellous miracles they accomplish. JOAN THE WAD is the Queen of the Lucky Cornish Piskeys, and with whom good luck and good health always attend.

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One lady writes : " My sister suffered very badly for years, but since I gave her a Joan the Wad to keep near her she is much easier. Do you think this is due to Joan or the Water from the Lucky Well ?

AS LUCK BRINGER

Another writes : " Since the War my wife and I have been dogged by persistent ill-luck, and we seemed to be sinking lower and lower. One day someone sent us a Joan the Wad. We have never found out who it was, but, coincidence if you like, within a week I got a much better job and my wife had some money left her. Since then we have never looked back and, needless to say, swear by ' Queen Joan.' "

AS MATCHMAKER

A young girl wrote and informed me that she had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has " Joan the Wad. "

AS PRIZEWINNER

A young man wrote us only last week : " For two years I entered competitions without luck, but since getting Joan the Wad I have frequently been successful, although I have not won a big prize, but I know that —, who won £2,000 in a competition, has one because I gave it him. When he won his £2,000 he gave me £100 for myself, so you see I have cause to bless ' Queen Joan.' "

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A man writes : " I had some shares that for several years I couldn't give away. They were 1/- shares, and all of a sudden they went up in the market to 7/9. I happened to be staring at Joan the Wad. Pure imagination, you may say, but I thought I saw her wink approvingly. I sold out, reinvested the money at greater profit and have prospered ever since. "

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AUTHENTIC SCIENCE FICTION

PLANET OF POWER

AUTHENTIC *Science* FICTION

**PLANET of
POWER**

By Jon J. Deegan.

1¹/₆
MONTHLY
No. 14

**Authentic
SCIENCE FICTION**

A full-length novel

PLANET OF POWER

by

Jon J. Deegan

No.

14

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projectiles

Letters to the Editor . . .

THIRSTY

World in a Test Tube was a good story, but on page 77 Mikal says, "... the ancients transported water through pipes from a large reservoir instead of making it on the spot from hydrogen and oxygen as we do." But the air, as you know, is three-quarters nitrogen and one-quarter oxygen, with 1 per cent of rare gases. To obtain a glass of water would take several hours. Can you give me a catalyst which speeds this reaction, for if the coming generation rely on this method they are going to be darned thirsty!

JOHN BROOM (Cricklewood)

What's the composition of air got to do with it? O_2 and H_2 react quite happily without explosion if the mixture is passed through a jet at a greater rate than the explosion wave (2,820 metres per sec.). Catalysts in common use are: carbon, sand, glass, cobalt, nickel, iron and copper. The platinum metals cause the greatest speed-up—combination occurring at room temperature without inflaming the mixture.



A STAND

Re Gold Men of Aureus, the

story was quite good. Apart from a few astrophysical errors, I quite enjoyed it. I must also applaud your honest attempt at setting a standard in science fiction. I was really pleased to see a publisher at last making a stand.

G. E. MILLS (Sidecup)



RARA AVIS

In the film *Rocketship X-M* which I saw some time ago, as the title states, the ship was meant to go to the Moon, a place of extremes of temperature. Yet when the crew land on Mars, they merely don oxygen masks without mention of space-suits. No human could have existed on the Moon in these outfits, could he?

M. G. ELDER (Glasgow)

Maybe not humans, Matt, but you get some rara avis in Hollywood!



TERMS

A query: I appreciate that a system consists of one luminary

Continued . . .

with planets circling it. Each star is a sun and has a system of its own. A number of these star-systems comprise a galaxy or island universe, and an undetermined number of these islands form the known universe. Right so far? Well, then—what is a constellation? Is it another term for a galaxy? Are Scorpio, Cygnus, Perseus, Alderbaran, Rigel, Vega, Centauri and the others single stars or are they constellations?

D. C. BRADBURY (Frimley)

A constellation is a number of fixed stars grouped within an imaginary outline. They form an arbitrary system of star-group classification, their significance is only empirical. Scorpio, Cygnus and Perseus are constellations. Alderbaran, Rigel and Vega are stars. a-Centauri and b-Centauri are stars in the constellation of Centaurus.



PAT

Just a few lines to convey a pat on the back. Congratula-

tions to all concerned in producing a first-class British science fiction magazine. Your covers are attractive, projectiles *not* devoted to SF "bobby-soxers," stories good, book reviews useful—and no bad points. None so far, anyway. If I do find any in the future, I'll be writing to slap you down.

D. W. CODY (Lincoln)



VETERAN

I've been reading SF for about fourteen years, having been reared on Wells, Verne and the other old masters. Later, I turned to the American mags, and have enjoyed them for many years. But where British pocketbooks are concerned, except for two, I have ignored them all. I'd placed your magazine in the same unholy company, without trial, until a friend started raving about SFM. So I chanced another 1/6. *Congratulations!* That one word insures my purchasing your publication ever more!

K. E. SMITH (Newcastle)

All we can say, K. E., is "it only goes to show"—and thanks.

missing something ?

We feel that many of our readers are missing something. We have met a scattered few down at the White Horse on Thursday evenings, but only a few. Nothing like the several thousands who make our magazine disappear from the London bookstalls.

Why don't you come? It's informal, chatty and highly entertaining. You will meet authors, artists and editors with their hair down. And if, like regular attender Arthur C. Clarke, Chairman of the British Interplanetary Society, you don't like liquor—do what he does and drink orangeade.

Our Technical Editor is there every week and would like to meet you. Remember, White Horse, Fetter Lane, Saloon Bar, any time, but only on Thursdays.



Some of you have asked why we don't give a verdict on Dianetics, the new psychological therapy originated by American SF writer Ron L. Hubbard.

The answer is mainly that we can't tell you what we don't know, and Dianetics is a young science and little data is available. For the benefit of readers

who are unfamiliar with this new branch of psychology, Dianetics claims to enable patients to cure their mental troubles by self-treatment.

Another reason why current scientific questions cannot be treated to the satisfaction of some of our readers is that we are, after all, a fiction magazine, and our full-length story must have first claim on our available space.



We hear that the sets are up on a largish number of science fiction films in Hollywood, many of them taken from classic stories of the past. Only a very few are interplanetary, due to the tremendous difficulties involved—we must be prepared for only a dribble of *Destination Moons*.

But it's nice to know that hard-headed film-backers are falling for our entertainment medium. We only hope that the pictures are credible and accurate, so that they won't do more harm than good by giving a cheap impression of science fiction.

We'll give you details as they come in.

—EDITOR

PLANET OF POWER

by Jon J. Deegan

CHAPTER ONE

OUTSIDE THE ELECTRON CLOUD

The door from Corridor 3/A opened and young Hartnell walked in, draping himself elegantly round my most comfortable chair and leisurely swinging one leg. "Know anything about ionisation, Pop?"

I switched off the microscope, pushed a handful of specimen-dissections to one side and leaned back, eyeing him with marked suspicion.

He cocked a quizzical, mocking eyebrow. "Why look at me like that?"

I sighed. "How regrettable it is, young Hartnell, to have your peculiar sense of approach. Come on—what's it all about?"

There were times, of course—before I got to know this tall, lean, young physicist, with his quick grin and tanned features, really well—when I might have embarked in all innocence upon a somewhat elementary exposition. Nowadays, however, I always realise that something deeper, more intriguing, lies behind his apparently aimless queries. For one of his years, Hartnell possesses a strangely tortuous mind.

"Look," I said patiently, "I'm a botanist. You're a physicist. Which of us might know best about ionisation?"

He grinned. "There's that, of course. As a matter of fact, something's cropped up . . ."

Tolerance and self-restraint are two of my few virtues. He deserved to have the microscope chucked at him. Instead, I sat there waiting.

"You know, Pop," said Hartnell, after a pause, "we've had quite a good trip this time—Krellig, Fellik, Orbis and the rest. Exciting, informative and—when we get home and draw all our back pay—profitable."

I spoke quietly and with considerable dignity. "Everything's about as clear as a jarful of Zenna swamp-mud.

'Ionisation'—'something's cropped up'—'we're on our way home to collect pay.' How extremely lucid!"

As always, he proved impervious to sarcasm. He swung himself from the chair and stood beside my desk, rubbing his chin with vague puzzlement. "Oh, is it?"

"You know very well it isn't!" I snapped. "Pull yourself together and tell me what's happened!"

This is the infuriatingly roundabout way in which young Hartnell brings news. Odd spoken phrases pop out at irregular points along his mental train of thought and the listener is supposed to link them up without further elucidation. Sometimes it's possible; this present instance was just hopeless.

"Fellow from the astronomy section tells me the ship's been diverted in the last few days for them to have a closer look at a queer job on the fringe of Appelegia—planet called Zeton. Old Grubersohn's absolutely running round in circles, they say."

I offered mental apologies—not to Hartnell but to some unnamed navigator. On several occasions recently I could have sworn that the aligning engines had been fired with abnormal frequency. In my ignorance I'd put it down to careless computation of our homeward course and had muttered testily against pilotage personnel.

We were returning in *Old Growler*—officially, Interplanetary Exploration Bureau spaceship No. 2213—from examination of Vega's planetary system. (Hartnell's recent mention of Krellig, Fellik and Orbis—three of the nine planets circling this star—may touch chords in the memories of those who have followed our adventures.) Boxes of botanical, zoological and geological specimens were stacked high in the research department's storage places; processing machines had already begun to devour untold miles of photographic records; analysis squads stood by, ready to tabulate, classify and file each major piece of information as it emerged—until by the time *Old Growler* landed again at headquarters, after many weary months of travelling, from the fringes of unexplored space all would be prepared for examination by scientific

panels. The verdicts of these committees would determine the nature of follow-up expeditions equipped to develop or exploit various planets in accordance with the data provided by Inter-X men.

Well, we'd done our job—exciting in one or two instances, boring and monotonous in others, where we poked round for weeks among bare, cold rocks without finding anything of note save scrapings of the inevitable fungi and lichens—and now everybody aboard was anxious to get home. *Old Growler* had set her nose in the right direction, there had followed the slow crawl through the orbits—slow because planetary debris littering the spaceways makes high speeds dangerous in such areas—succeeded by weeks of acceleration as the ship moved into interstellar void.

Once the main acceleration ceased and we could again move freely about the ship, work had begun in the great laboratories and offices. Truth to tell, we were all thoroughly grateful, for there is nothing worse than lying day after day in an acceleration hammock—sometimes feeling deathly space-sick—while a ship hauls itself up to cruising speed. In later stages, to allow more normal existence, low power from the engines is applied only by “night.” (The quotation marks are included because space itself possesses neither day nor night, but human beings must live according to schedule.) Main job then remaining for the pilotage section is constant routine course-checking, making occasional adjustments with the aligning motors when the ship diverges from target by more than a permitted fraction of a degree.

But navigators are not the only personnel aboard who keep unceasing vigilance. In addition to tabulating new readings of both near and distant stars from fresh viewpoints, the astronomy section's observers study planet surfaces at short range, turning all their fancy gadgets on first one, then another globe until atmosphere content, surface characteristics, temperature, radiation and the rest of the catalogue are recorded in detail for the archives.

So part of Hartnell's riddle lay revealed—especially as “Old Grubersohn” is head of the astronomy section—but

I decided to seek confirmation. "What have they seen that's important enough to divert the ship? And where does the ionisation come in?"

He wriggled himself into the chair again. "This Zeton—it's covered by ionised clouds and they can't make any impression with their instruments. Fascinating, eh?"

"No doubt," I said drily. I swept a hand to indicate the specimens piled on my workbench. "This lot's only the top layer from one of seventeen crates from Orbis. I've enough stuff here to keep me fascinated at the microscope for the next six months, without bothering about ionised cloud vapours. In any case, I've seen ionised layers before, and when you've seen one you've seen the lot."

"Not one like this, you haven't!" declared Hartnell, firmly if ungrammatically.

Obviously, more work was out of the question until I'd humoured him, so I began rather wearily to pack away slides and specimens, what time he smiled delightedly at his victory.

The last few items were being placed in a cabinet drawer when the door opened again, this time to admit Tubby Goss, the rather solemn, round-faced photographer who usually forms the third member of our trio on exploratory trips. "Have you seen it, Pop?" he asked, eagerly. "Isn't it terrific?"

"This is sheer conspiracy by you two young devils to keep me from my work," I said bitterly. "As far as I know, ionised clouds have no place in a botanist's schedule."

"But that's the whole point!" exclaimed Hartnell. "Think what sort of plants might be growing on the surface underneath——"

"Voltaic violets!" said Tubby.

"Magnetised mushrooms!"

"Galvanic geraniums!"

The young fools then started to dance round, clapping their hands and chanting some idiotic chorus about "radio-active radishes." I shut them up by slamming the desk drawer and saying, rather curtly, "Come on, then. But

don't be surprised if old Grubersohn throws us out on our ears."

However, the astronomy chief—normally a rather pompous and short-tempered individual—seemed so overwhelmed by interest being shown in his discovery that he apparently forgave all intrusions, because when we arrived in the main observation cabin we found him delivering pontifical discourse to quite a large and assorted audience.

" . . . most interesting, if not actually unique," he was saying as we went in, standing with his back to the direct visor-screen, hands resting comfortably upon his pronounced paunch. "I am happy to say that only meticulous observation of the routine which I personally devised allowed this discovery to be made. My assistants deserve fullest praise . . ." His tone made it obvious, however, where in his opinion congratulations should be directed. "You may judge the importance which our scientific panel attaches to this research by learning that the ship has for the past five days been diverted from her course and that a landing expedition will probably be despatched to Zeton."

He caught sight of Hartnell and myself and smiled nastily, for there was little love lost between us. "Dear me," he said, in mock surprise. "It seems that our humble efforts are even more important than we thought."

Everyone turned to look, covering me with embarrassment, but Hartnell merely grinned cheerily in return.

"For the benefit of latecomers," said Grubersohn, "let me repeat that the highly-ionised clouds covering Zeton possess a normal water-vapour base, so far as spectroscopic observation permits. Nevertheless, atomic dissociation producing this ionisation is sufficiently vigorous to repel all radar impulses; therefore image reaction in electronic telescopes is precisely nil. Visual telescopes produce only views of the layer's upper surface, and no gaps are available through which we may obtain any glimpse of what exists underneath. In all my very considerable experience I have never known a world to be so completely veiled, despite the resources of modern science."

Hartnell drew a deep breath. "I've never pretended to like the man," he whispered, "but he's got something there." He paused significantly. "I wonder exactly what the surface of Zeton looks like. Makes you think, doesn't it, Pop?"

"All I can think of," I said, "is seventeen crates of stuff from Orbis."

With something of a flourish, Grubersohn switched on various viewing screens, waving aside people in the front of the throng and saying, "Allow our distinguished but tardy visitors to enjoy the astronomical section's remarkable work."

"Pay no attention to him," said Hartnell, as I hung back reluctantly. "Let's grab a good seat."

Least impressive among the screens—and this was somewhat startling by reason of the fact that its image is usually most revealing of the lot—was the electronic viewer. No flicker of light showed from the planet, although its circle could be easily distinguished against the faint spots of more distant bodies. Infra-red, on the other hand, blazed with a round, blank circle. But from telescopic-visual, in full natural colour, there confronted our frightened gaze a sparkling holocaust of gold and purple. Frankly, the sight of such titanic forces in full play made my mind grow faint and my knees tremble. Those golden cloudbanks held untold electrical potentials, accumulating vast energies that eventually discharged themselves in shimmering violence to an adjoining cumulus. Whereupon the balance of the second cloud formation became disturbed in turn, causing further discharges that reacted similarly—in short, a continuous electrical storm of unbelievable proportions raged in the upper atmosphere of Zeton, its flickering lightnings merging into one dazzling, purple haze. Over all hung a faint aura of shining electron dust, glowing in its deadly ionisation.

I moved away from the screen, feeling decidedly sick.

"Spectacular, don't you think, Pop?" asked Hartnell.

There were other words for it.

"All very nice to look at," said Tubby, "but I wouldn't like to be much closer than this side of the screen."

"The controllers are no doubt highly intrigued," I said. "Yet what can they do except have photographs taken?"

"You will be unaware of the phenomenon, perhaps," said Grubersohn, importantly, "but photographic methods for some reason prove unsatisfactory. Every filter and emulsion at our disposal either produces a completely blank disc or fails to register any image whatsoever. This is due to the unusual radiation, no doubt."

"No doubt," agreed Hartnell, blandly. The chief astronomer was sufficiently suspicious of this remark to throw him a dirty look.

"One point surprises me," I said, "and that's how you know there's a planet underneath at all. Suppose that thing on the screen's only a sort of ghastly firework display."

"An excellent point," agreed Grubersohn. "Excellent!"

There was a brief, significant pause.

"Well," said Tubby, "don't keep us in suspense. Is there anything really solid?"

Grubersohn looked at us with due solemnity. "Our instruments record a certain gravitational attraction, indicating presence of a planet. At the same time, we must not forget that such attraction may prove to be merely the effect of magnetic forces."

I shrugged helplessly. "How can we find out, then?"

He looked at me, I thought, in very peculiar fashion.

"The first step, of course, is to despatch a test rocket."

"Ah!" said Tubby, with dawning enlightenment. "If it goes right through and comes out the other side we'll know those fireworks are nothing but electrical blow-offs."

"Exactly!" Grubersohn rubbed his bony hands vigorously. Naturally, the discharges may cause the rocket to disintegrate instantaneously. In that event——"

I turned away, muttering something about playing with fire. Really, the prospect of deliberately provoking that devilish, shimmering disc made my blood run cold.

"On the other hand," continued Grubersohn, "if the test is successful all will be ready for the expedition."

I swung round again, consternation scrawled across my

features and a cold hand clutching at my heart. "Expedition?" I echoed, in a quavery, croaking voice. "You mean they seriously intend to send men through that—that inferno? Grieving galaxies!" Shamelessly, I borrowed the last phrase from Hartnell, who has a weakness in times of stress for alliteration. "It's suicide—sheer suicide!"

Grubersohn raised his eyebrows, and that peculiar expression crept over his face once more. "If you take that view," he said, slowly, "I wonder you volunteered for the trip!"

I had a strong impression that the surroundings grew suddenly dim and a roaring sound filled my ears. "Volunteered? Me?"

"Oh, yes," said young Hartnell, brightly. "You and Tubby and myself. I thought it might be fun. As a matter of fact, the personnel superintendent wasn't frightfully keen when I answered the call they put out. Without him actually saying as much, I gathered he'd have preferred three individuals not quite so highly valued as ourselves. However, I pushed our past record in front of his face and he relented." He beamed, anticipating our approbation.

"Stuttering Sirius!" I said feebly, and tottered into the corridor.

I hoped with all my heart that the test rocket might explode violently and satisfactorily on the outer fringes of that savage electrical storm. Nothing else could save us from the consequences of young Hartnell's unspeakable folly.

CHAPTER TWO

FIRST JOURNEY TO ZETON—BY PROXY

Tubby and I dragged him forcibly back to the cabin, where we slammed him into a chair and demanded explanations.

"You mean to say you've had the infernal cheek to drag us—without asking—into this hare-brained scheme?" I demanded, breathing hard. "I may be getting on in years,

but I'm not an old man yet—in fact, I'd like to live to be an old man! When I've got to die I want to die in bed, with flowers and doctors and nurses—not cooped up in a peeper hurtling through some damned great electric furnace!"

"Oh, come now, Pop . . ." began young Hartnell; but Tubby shut him up. "Anybody can tell what sort of job it is by the controllers calling for volunteers," said our plump photographer, adding his indignation to mine. "Absolute suicide!"

"What I can't fathom is why they gave us the job," I went on. "After all, our last three trips of any consequence weren't exactly howling successes. Almost everything we touched ended in disaster." I ticked off the sad catalogue on my fingers. "On Krellig we got out of a disintegrating city by the skin of our teeth after thoroughly annoying the inhabitants; on Felik we nearly started a civil war; on Orbis we lost a unique race of plant-creatures by letting them blow themselves up with a volcano—why, what's the matter?"

Hartnell had sprung dramatically to his feet. "I see it all now! That miserable personnel superintendent! I thought our record was good—instead, it's so bad they actually want to get rid of us for good!"

The indignation on his countenance was so comical and his voice rose to such a squawk of protest that Tubby and I—although reluctantly at first—dissolved into chuckles.

After a second or so, Hartnell himself grinned broadly and said: "You know, the situation isn't so bad, really. That ionosphere looks rather alarming, but after all an ionosphere's not new. Dozens of worlds have 'em, only Zeton's happens to be a bit lively." He always did possess a gift for understatement.

"Even if we get a ship through, what are the chances of landing—always supposing there's something to land on?" I inquired.

"Pretty good."

"Good?" We stared at him, but his expression for once seemed genuinely serious.

"Remember I asked you, Pop, if you knew anything about ionisation?"

Yes, I remembered all right.

"In the absence of an answer, let me say that ionisation's only another word for gases and liquids in a state of excitation which sends a lot of loose electrons—and ions—wandering all over the place, thereby providing easy paths for electric currents. It's used in lots of fancy types of electric lighting—the old-time neon signs and mercury-vapour or sodium-vapour lamps worked on that principle, too."

This was no doubt all very interesting and instructive, but I failed to see where it was getting us.

"Ionisation in a planet's atmosphere is due to cosmic and solar radiation. Often it bounces back radio waves. Remember the trouble they had on Earth centuries ago until they found out about what they called the Heaviside and Appleton layers? Intensified for some reason—as on Zeton—the ionised layers short-circuit lightning in electric storms." He took a turn or two around the cabin to emphasise his next point. "You've got to remember that all those fireworks are taking place high in the atmosphere—so high, in fact, that the planet's surface is most likely quite calm and safe."

"Calm and safe?" Tubby and I gasped our simultaneous disbelief. If there was, indeed, solid earth on Zeton, it must surely be an inferno of continuous lightning bolts from those seething skies—a place of eternal deafening thunder generated by violently displaced air.

"All right, then," said Hartnell, "look at it this way. Why should cloud discharges bother to force jagged paths to earth when there's a smooth, safe route to another cloud through ionised atmosphere?"

"You tell us," suggested Tubby. "Why?"

"Because electricity always takes the easiest path to find its own level of potential. And for the same reason it won't bother to strike any peeper ship passing through."

"Put like that," I said, at last, "you make it sound all very nice and plausible."

"Why," said young Hartnell, with what I considered

spurious heartiness, "you surely didn't think I'd take you anywhere really dangerous, did you?"

We both looked at him hard, but he returned our gaze with the bland, childlike innocence that we know well enough by now to distrust completely.

"Well," he said, briskly, "that's settled, then. Come on, let's see how the rocket test's shaping."

As a matter of fact, astronomy workshops had made very good progress, and by the time we reached the upper observation cabin, mechanics were busy with micrometer alignments for the launching. Even at this comparatively close range—by space travel standards—the distance demanded accuracy of projection.

A large visor screen linked to a radar beam shone dull and blank on the far wall.

We were greeted by a tall, broad-shouldered man with a ready smile. "I'm Gravelly, the observer," he announced. "They're almost ready for firing."

Three-dimensional, deflectional ballistics provide problems beyond a poor botanist's understanding. "Bit of a job laying the course, isn't it?" I asked. "I mean, the ship's travelling one way at a certain angle, Zeton's moving off at another tangent, yet somehow the test rocket's track must link the two."

Gravelly laughed. "The automatic computers work all that out. In any case, radio range is sufficient to guide her nearly halfway. Gravity from Zeton will drag her in after that. You're satisfied if she hits anywhere, I suppose? No particular spot in mind?"

Was this sarcasm, I wondered.

Hartnell must have been thinking similarly. "We want your little squib affair to strike good and square. If the thing only scrapes the atmosphere and comes out the other side we still won't know whether there's anything solid for us to land on."

Gravelly stared for a moment, then said: "You mean you're actually anxious to take a ship to Zeton?" He was a young man whose features readily betrayed his thoughts,

and I had no doubt he considered us crazy. Maybe he was right, at that.

I'd heard from various people that a Bouchier self-tracking rocket provides spectacular results on a visor-screen. The nose is fitted with a small radar transmitter that sends a continuous picture of the journey for record purposes, while the final stages are photographed from the screen in a series of terrifically-fast exposures—several hundred thousands of them a second, in fact. In addition, the rocket contains impact-fuses for nearly a couple of pounds of amitronal, so that direct-visual observers may see a flash from the point of landing.

Displaying confidence born of practice, Gravelly seated himself before a complicated panel fitted with rows of meter dials and coloured signal lights. Various control jargon and formulae emerged from a nearby loudspeaker, to which he replied in equally incomprehensible terms, clicking switches the while. At length, a tiny, circular speck shone whitely in the exact centre of the screen.

"There she is!" said Hartnell, with satisfaction. "Zeton—viewed from the test rocket! Now wait for it!"

"Synchroniser on," said the loudspeaker, unemotionally.

"Synchroniser on," confirmed Gravelly.

A high-pitched whine rose and fell for a few seconds, settling into a steady drone. The firing relays, I learned, had been locked electrically in step. When two sets of computers—one sighted from the ship, the other from the rocket itself—reached identical conclusions in a brief period from now, the projectile would commence its journey towards self-destruction.

We waited tensely. I stared at the screen and its little, unwinking circle until my eyes ached.

Suddenly a red light flickered. Somewhere an alarm bell tinkled.

Gravelly leaned back and snapped off switches. "She's gone," he said.

"Gone?" demanded Tubby, incredulously.

The tiny circle on the screen appeared exactly the same as before.

"Still three million miles away," murmured Hartnell. "Won't be much difference in the view for some time. Let's go somewhere and have a sleep."

"How long before the rocket arrives?"

"Little under four hours," said Gravelly. "She's off at about twenty miles a second. That's due to increase to a couple of thousand or so as the gravity drag takes effect, then we'll slow her down with time-switch braking rockets and she ought to hit at about ten miles a second. That'll give the cameras time to act and you might even see what's underneath those fireworks—if the radar still ticks."

"That's right," agreed Hartnell. "The ionosphere may only stop radar impulses going in to reflect from the surface; it might not stop 'em coming out."

"Well," said Gravelly, "drop in any time you like to see the fun. The view ought to be really impressive in another couple of hours."

Believe me, it was! But we didn't see it, of course, until after we'd laid ourselves down for a time in one of the comfortable, dimly lit rest-rooms, where young Hartnell characteristically went straight off to sleep, leaving me staring at the ceiling and trying in imagination to follow that test-rocket which even now was blazing a trail we might eventually follow. I felt my features twitch as full significance of the phrase dawned upon me. Perhaps, in the circumstances, it was hardly fitting to think about "blazing" routes.

Bells rang suddenly, nearly startling me out of my skin, and loudspeakers announced "Attention! Attention! Third degree turning commences in eleven minutes. Routine two-seven applicable immediately. Routine two-seven immediately."

I knew what it all meant. *Old Growler* would soon swing from her present route into a vast orbit round Zeton, waiting a few million miles out to see what happened to the rocket and, if necessary, to launch the scout ship—or peeper, as spacemen call them colloquially—which would carry the three

of us. Whatever results the record showed, I knew there could be no intention of risking the great vessel herself by trying to land on a strange planet covered by an electrical cloud that blocked radar observation, making it uncertain whether the surface lay fifty miles beneath the ionosphere—or only one mile.

Warning of diversion became essential because of the action of both centrifugal and centripetal forces at our present speed, which would move all articles not securely anchored—including personnel. Knowing that none of us was currently engaged upon any job on laboratories or workshops and that our private belongings were safely stowed away in the Davitt-lockers, we need take little notice of the warning.

Hartnell didn't even stir, so I leaned across and fastened his safety belt. It was precaution rather than necessity, for turning, even at third degree rating—does not exert upon contents of a ship the same violent effects as when braking engines operate.

I was about to perform the same office for Tubby, who lay on my right, when he said, softly, "That's all right, Pop. I can fix it."

"Can't you sleep, either? Look at Hartnell—he's actually starting to snore!"

"He never did have any imagination for some things," said Tubby. "Sometimes I think his nerves—if he has any—must be made of steel tension cable."

"He's got nerve, all right," I said, grimly. "Think what he's let us in for now!"

Silence fell in the dim cabin, punctuated only by more warning bells. Then I knew the strange, tingling pressure of space turning, but it didn't disturb me overmuch and I fell into a fitful doze.

I think the hooters announcing that the turning manoeuvre was completed must have roused me. I saw Hartnell try to sit up, straining vainly against the safety-belt for a moment before realising what held him prostrate. "Oh," he said. "What's been happening?"

Tubby explained.

"What's the time?"

I told him.

"Anything else we can do for you?" inquired Tubby, sarcastically.

"I don't think so." He said this in all seriousness. Sarcasm could be completely wasted on Hartnell. "Let's have a look at the rocket."

It was understandable, I suppose, that the experiment caused considerable interest among ship's personnel. Quite a number of totally unauthorised people had crammed themselves into the upper observation cabin, ignoring Gravelly's pleas to depart. Young Hartnell, however, stood no nonsense, bulldozing a path both verbally and physically through the crowd until at last we stood before the screen, radio transmitted light from Zetón's terrifying envelope reflected whitely upon our faces.

The rocket must have been travelling at full speed for some time. The viewing area itself measured nearly ten feet square and the planet's image occupied almost half this space, providing by such dimensions a picture of appalling clarity. Giant flashes continuously sliced through what appeared to be mottled haze—in reality great cloud banks piled up to fantastic heights.

Contemplating this fascinating and awful picture, I felt a dull, cold weight manifest itself in the pit of my stomach. Why—oh, why—had I allowed Hartnell's breezy theorising to deter me from boldly and sensibly withdrawing from the expedition? Not that I dared do so now—even though I might not actually be blamed. But everyone would think I'd grown faint-hearted only when this frightful view had brought fully home to me an indication of the true peril.

Most of those in the room betrayed open admiration of three men who apparently possessed sufficient courage to volunteer for a trip into that fiery horror; others, I am sure, considered the gesture a piece of foolhardy boastfulness which would receive no reward save death, but at least they didn't say so. Well, frightened or not, I still had my pride, and I wasn't going to crawl out now, come what might.

But if the picture on that screen seemed startling at the time we first re-entered the cabin, it was nothing to what happened in later stages. Transmitting a greatly magnified image as it streaked towards Zeton, the rocket reached a point where the flashing, glowing circle expanded visibly. With eyes riveted to the scene, every spectator became deluded into a sensation that he in person looked from the nose of the projectile, seeing as it were at first-hand the scintillating target rapidly approaching.

A friend once took me up in an ancient atmosphere flying machine during a demonstration of exhibits from the science section's Museum of Antiquities back at headquarters. When flying at 200 miles per hour three miles high, the earth beneath appeared to move with unbelievable slowness; alighting at the same speed—on a mechanical undercarriage, of all things!—meant that the landscape swept past in an alarming blur.

Similarly, in the present case, we received an object lesson in the relativity of speed—a subject first demonstrated by one of those old, twentieth-century scientific geniuses whose work we admire even today. (His name, I think, was Einstein.) Compared with space speeds of *Old Growler*—or even a scout ship—the rocket merely crawled. Yet moving in the void, far distant from any object by which the eye could measure fantastic velocities, speed possesses no real meaning. Here we were receiving the same view as an observer lying prone in the projectile's nose, watching that dreadful ionosphere blaze swiftly nearer.

Faster, ever faster, we sped towards the dazzling inferno. The eye simply dare not leave the screen. I felt myself diving with the rocket, clenching my hands on imaginary levers and gripping desperately, as though to relax for an instant might leave the projectile plunging irretrievably, wildly out of control.

Faster, faster! I felt my nerves stretched to unbearable tension. I stood no longer in the upper observation cabin—I was out there, nearly three million miles away, hurtling alone in that test-rocket. How long before the impact?

Lightning flashes snapped viciously by the thousand between massive, towering cloud banks, making it obvious, now that Zeton's picture filled the entire viewing space and shone with more detail, that much of what we had previously imagined to be ionised haze was in fact composed of innumerable, continuous electric discharges.

Faster! Faster! I felt my senses reeling and my eyes beginning to grow dim. A dive into that vast holocaust was inevitable! On the point of throwing an arm before my face, I was saved by the automatic braking rockets. In order to check the projectile's speed for benefit of the camera records, these rockets must perforce be discharged at the forward end. For a full fifteen seconds, therefore, the screen went blank while exhaust fumes blotted out the radar's transmitter's view with clouds of electrons from atomic hydrogen. Deceleration, swift as it was, lasted no longer than this brief period, for without fragile human bodies to consider, the rocket could be slowed in determined, almost brutal fashion.

Tension in the cabin relaxed with a unanimous sigh and everybody began talking at once. When final streamers of exhaust swept themselves clear, the picture seemed to have become stationary once more, except that the corruscating, never-ceasing lightning flashes still shimmered in Zeton's upper air.

"How long now before she hits?" asked Hartnell.

Gravelly calculated mentally. "About twelve minutes. Speed's down to one or two miles a second, but she'll travel faster as soon as gravity begins to lay hold."

Nothing remained save to watch the screen and wait, even though events must happen far too fast for the human eye to perceive.

Minutes dragged like hours. Almost imperceptibly, the great clouds covering Zeton loomed larger in that comparatively small section of the planetary circle encompassed by the projectile's radar transmitter. And we found also, much to our surprise, that with increasing nearness the electrical flashes were more widespread than originally believed. "Not that it gives me a lot of comfort," I confided to Tubby, "but

at least there's a glimmering of hope. We might even manage to slip through a quiet patch in the cloud."

He grunted. "I suppose so—if you can find a way of telling where lightning's going to strike next."

Now everyone waited breathlessly for the culmination. Not many more seconds could elapse before the rocket hit.

It happened like someone switching off a light. One instant the screen blazed with that demoniac fury of electrical discharge—next moment all was dark, save for swirling green and red circles imprinted in the retina by reaction.

Young Hartnell straightened himself and drew a deep breath. "Well," he said, with a hint of despair, "I don't mind admitting I didn't see a thing."

"If there's any reasonable space at all between the cloud base and the surface we ought to have spotted something," I remarked. "You did say the projectile would hit at about ten miles a second?"

Gravelly nodded.

"A second can be a long time." Hadn't we just proved it during those moments of tense waiting? "Even if the clouds are twenty miles up we'd have a couple of seconds' time for observation."

"Not if the ionisation actually does blanket radar waves," said Hartnell, stubbornly. He moved across the cabin with quick, jerky strides and for a moment I thought he was leaving us in a huff, but at the door he paused and made an almost imperceptible movement with his head. Tubby and I followed him obediently.

"What's the idea?"

"There'll be a rush any minute now to see the camera records. We might as well be first—in case the crowd annoys old Grubersohn and he throws everybody out!"

Which showed that Hartnell possesses a certain shrewdness—"low cunning" is Tubby's less tolerant description—and sense of anticipation.

As it happened, we were well ahead in the scramble and reached the main observation cabin just as the processed pictures popped from the transmission-tube. Grubersohn was

superintending their loading into the projector-viewer when the mob arrived. Not that they actually rushed into the room, but the stream of interested spectators, all trying hard to appear nonchalant, could not fail to pass unnoticed.

Grubersohn stared round for a moment and then got on his dignity in no uncertain manner. "I must request unauthorised persons to leave at once," he said, in his pompous, high-pitched voice. "We are undertaking important scientific investigation here—not screening a free cinematograph entertainment for all idlers in the ship who cannot find other means of passing the time."

After all, we were authorised persons to a certain extent, insofar as the camera record affected our forthcoming journey, so we stood fast beside the projector. Grubersohn, having watched the others file out rather sheepishly, looked hard at us, I thought, but said nothing further.

Then there was re-created on the screen that breathtaking dive into the electric holocaust. The chief astronomer, not seeming particularly impressed, by-passed large portions of the film until at last there appeared successions of warning black grids across the picture, signalling the point where high-speed exposures began.

Trial and error located the crucial point in the record where Zeton's flaming ionosphere faded. This time, of course, it showed gradually instead of producing that abrupt effect we had seen in direct transmission. But the result, to all intents and purposes, was the same. Once beyond the cloud base—or, for all we knew, somewhere inside it—the record remained blank.

Everyone stared for a long time in wondering silence.

Grubersohn made the next move by calling Visual Observation.

"Nothing to report," they said. "No flash visible through the ionosphere. Projectile should have emerged several minutes previously if Zeton is entirely gaseous. Moreover, automatic radar transmissions would have resumed. Inference is that the projectile has landed."

Hartnell grinned ruefully, letting his hands fall in mock

helplessness to his sides. "Nothing for it," he said, "but to have a closer look!"

CHAPTER THREE

"LITTLE GROWLER" RUNS THE GAUNTLET

Repetition is apt to be tedious. No need, then for me to describe how we faced for a third time that dreadful descent into Zeton's electric storms—on this occasion not by radar observation or by camera record but in physical reality. Naturally, our approach was slower and more cautious, nor did we directly view the path ahead. No modern space vessel possesses more than a limited number of vision ports; experience has proved how various scientific eyes are so much more efficient than the faulty human retina and for this reason a multiplicity of screens—radar, telescopic, infra-red, ultra-violet and cosmic-detector—are installed. Through these screens, helped by the usual array of instruments, we calculated our route with infinite care.

"I'll take her in at a low tangent," announced Hartnell, who by reason of a previous instruction course had been appointed official pilot of the scout ship. "It means staying a little longer amid the fireworks, but that's better than going straight down and hitting the floor."

The choice, though unpleasant, was definitely the lesser of two evils. I only hoped we weren't roasted before he found how far solid ground lay beneath the electric clouds.

Seen in the telescopic viewer by direct light instead of radar's black and white, Zeton assumed an aspect of sheer, terrifying beauty, with a purple haze of shimmering ionisation now becoming apparent across golden cloud formations which were continually lashed by lightning discharges. I kept thinking: "How can we get through? How can we possibly get through?"

Our ship—one of the seven or eight normally kept in great bays on the space vessel's lower levels and available for short

trips—was a favourite craft, known to us as *Little Growler*. Advantage of these scout ships is their simplicity, and they can be operated easily by a crew of two—usually radio installation engineers taking communications equipment to a satellite. In our present instance we were three-handed—and likely to need all the care and swift action that every one of us could bring to bear.

We were not more than a few thousand miles from the ionosphere when unpleasant manifestations began. Meters registering electronic activity on the vessel's outer surfaces swung ominously towards red danger-marks.

Hartnell's eyes flickered from dial to dial as fast as the lightning itself. "Insulation going," he said, softly.

"Is that bad?"

"Depends." He spared no glance from the array of switches and controls. "Never expected it would last all the way down, anyhow."

By some method I didn't fully understand, technicians back at the ship had equipped *Little Growler* with a neutron screen in the hope of keeping the vessel immune from electrical discharges. (I imagined the principle to be somewhat similar to that used in the electronic dissipator unit which dissolved small particles of cosmic debris wandering into *Old Growler's* path—pieces of material not sufficiently large to warrant alterations in course.) Scout ships, travelling at much lower speeds, did not boast such refinements and were obliged to avoid such collisions as best they might after warnings from the radar look-out.

The neutron screen had been employed as a medium of absorption. Ordinary insulation substances were obviously useless for the purpose. Had the ship entered a negative electrical field, positive charges would automatically have been generated inside; if the field happened to be positive, negative potential would have built itself up similarly—in either event causing both peril and unpleasantness.

And now it seemed that the titanic voltages generated in Zeton's atmosphere were sufficient, even at our present range,

to saturate the screen. What would happen when we actually dived into the ionosphere?

To my increasing horror, I observed a purplish halo begin to form round Hartnell's head. Then, when I noticed the others' peculiar expressions and looked at myself in a nearby mirror, I saw my own profile to be outlined in that same glistening mist. Needles on both main warning meters were pressed hard back at their limits, well past the sinister red marks.

Every meter in those serried rows beside the multi-coloured signal lights had gone completely haywire. *Little Growler* was hurtling onwards into those fierce, electrical tempests and we dared make no alteration in her course!

"Well," said young Hartnell, "we can only wait and hope! Anyway, for your comfort, I'm pretty sure I locked her on the right track before we went to put on the suits."

"No telling what these electrical tricks may do to the controls," I said.

He chuckled. "Good old Pop! Always cheerful and optimistic!"

The radar screen went blank first, all others following in succession over a period of eight or ten seconds. Now we were cut off completely—three men in a metal shell, diving helplessly groundwards at unknown speed.

"We must be well inside the cloud by now," said Hartnell. "Better fix safety belts—just in case the ground's nearer than we think!"

I suppose imminence of death not only affects different people in different ways but varies also according to circumstances. Our present situation possessed inherent melodramatic elements—yet there it ended. I died half a dozen deaths during those few horrific minutes we were enveloped in the electron cloud, merely sitting in numb, horrified fascination—not struggling or yelling to escape—just waiting.

Then, with startling suddenness, we emerged from the ionosphere. Visor-screens quickly lit up once more, revealing a genuine, honest-to-goodness landscape; meter-needles, auto-

matically compensated to throw off magnetic effects, again registered normally.

Hartnell slapped the quick-release mechanism of his belt and sprang to the controls. I felt *Little Growler* haul out of the dive in response to his fingers on the firing switches and at the same time saw the horizon-indicator come to rest in almost level position. During those previous dreadful moments it had swung hideously up and down like the pendulum on an old-style mechanical clock.

Relief poured over me in healing waves, tempered by a niggling thought that at some future time—if we wished ever to regain our rightful places with the Inter-X expedition—the ordeal of a return journey must be faced.

And then the warm glow faded, giving way to little, icy prickles. For moving across the face of the radar screen on Zeton's newly-revealed landscape I saw unmistakable buildings—large buildings, too, although constructed quite low to the ground and of queer geometrical patterns.

"Well, well!" said young Hartnell, softly. "Wonder what sort of things live down there!"

Flickering reflections of lightning flashes, streaking in thousands across the unholy sky, lit up circular roofs and curving walls that stretched in strange, interlocking fashion almost as far as the eye could see. There were trees, too, and tracks which looked like roads.

"I don't suppose we'll escape a good deal of ionisation down there," remarked Tubby. His voice contained an unusually reflective tone, raising my suspicions.

"Can't be worse than that little lot we've just passed through."

"You're not at your brightest, Pop—which isn't surprising, I suppose, considering recent fun and games," said Hartnell.

"Both of you," I said, accusingly, "have something on your minds!"

They looked at one another and winked, guffawing hugely. "The Mattus!" said Hartnell. "You're the expert on that—and I hope you enjoy it!"

Then realisation came and, frankly, I was appalled. It all hinged upon the fact that Zeton was inhabited—by intelligent beings, judging by the presence of buildings. This brought with it routine obligations to communicate with these creatures in our task of adding to the sum of human knowledge.

Imagine the difficulties of early space explorers in exchanging messages with strange species. In a great many cases inhabitants of other worlds, having evolved along entirely different lines from *homo sapiens*—sometimes, indeed, with biological principles completely at variance with previously accepted schemes—possess no vocal or visual systems capable of understanding on our part. Even in cases where a definite spoken language is employed, no text-books are available to speed comprehension—and anyone who has ever tried learning another tongue, even with the help of an instruction manual, knows that it's a long and painful job.

Best that Inter-X can do for us in this respect is to issue Erriksen vocabularies. These handy, if complicated, volumes often work well, but communication is laborious. Most notable stride has been made by introduction of the Mattus thought-transferer. (I almost write "perfection" of the machine, but such description, unfortunately, would not be correct.) Personally, I consider Professor Mattus one of the century's greatest men. But there—I may be prejudiced simply because his invention has saved me a great deal of inconvenience.

Briefly, the apparatus provides an electrical aid to telepathy. A telescopic rod, extended when ready for action and held near the subject's brain-case, connects with a small pack fitted beneath the gravity-reactor in Bergmann Mark VI and Mark VII atmosphere suits. From here a highly ingenious cable runs to a molybdenum plate fitted in the helmet, which at the touch of a switch snaps lightly into contact with the operator's forehead.

Given a reasonably co-operative subject, simple thought-images are readily forthcoming and very little practice is

needed before messages to serve all normal purposes can be exchanged.

This brief outline serves to show why Hartnell and Tubby flung themselves into such ridiculous transports of delight. For my part, I contemplated with dismay the prospect of extending a metal Mattus rod in Zeton's highly-ionised atmosphere. The thing would prove nothing less than a lightning conductor.

"I didn't survive one variety of electrical suicide to shove my head into another," I said, grimly. "Why, the whole essence of the Mattus theory lies in metal contacts. If I don't hold the bare end of the rod inside my glove the circuit's broken.

"That's what makes it so funny!" howled Hartnell. In a way that made my blood run cold he took one hand away from the controls to slap Tubby roguishly. "Can't you imagine Pop holding a Mattus rod and hopping about with blue sparks coming out of his —?"

"I won't do it!" I told these two cackling idiots.

"Now, now, Pop!" He wagged a finger in mock reproof. "Got to do your duty. . . ."

"I shan't get a chance if you crash this peeper before we've hardly seen the place."

"Remember we'll have to tell the controller what we find. And if he thinks you didn't say 'Hallo' to them properly over your little Mattus machine he'll. . . ."

I voiced utter blasphemy by Inter-X standards. "Curse the controller!" I said.

Well clear of the "city"—if so it might be described—we sought a landing site. Many tricky elements enter into visiting a strange planet for the first time. Inhabitants are naturally distrustful more often than not, and only considerably experience rams it home to explorers that they themselves appear to be weird creatures equally as dangerous and revolting.

Understanding of this point, I think, has been responsible for passages in the Inter-X manual which rule with utmost

firmness that speed-gamma pistols shall not be employed upon any intelligent life—even in self-defence—unless at least two members of the expedition have previously perished. The regulation has caused more discussion and heartburning than any other, but headquarters adhere stubbornly to the view that deaths may be caused by ignorance or accident. Cynical spacemen consider that Inter-X prefer to lose a couple of men rather than have a full-scale war on their hands.

Be that as it may, no one denies that normal suspicions can be exacerbated by damage from landing jets or other incidental causes—such as a test projectile, for instance. Our welcome from the people of Zeton might not be particularly warm if the rocket proved to have fallen on some of their dwellings, possibly with disastrous results for the citizenry.

Eventually we selected a stretch of semi-desert land, sparsely dotted with low scrub, some ten miles from the city, and here, where *Little Growler's* braking blasts of atomic hydrogen could do no harm, we made first physical contact with Zeton.

Our immediate action was attempted radio communication with the parent ship. Nothing could be heard in our receivers save an unbearable roar of static. Radar beams directed upwards showed that the screens were still useless against the ionosphere.

Through the space-lock we made routine tests for atmosphere, humidity and temperature.

"Actually breathable," said Hartnell, "and not too warm. Stinks rather of ozone, but I suppose that's only to be expected with all this lightning discharge around the place." He appended a typical afterthought. "Unless it's the local inhabitants that cause the smell."

A short time later the three of us stood on the rough ground, looking across towards wooded slopes where we had previously seen the peculiar city, while overhead the opaque, cloud-filled sky flickered and blazed with those terrible electric tempests. We were on an unexplored planet—cut off from *Old Growler* and not knowing what lay before us.

CHAPTER FOUR

ELECTRIFYING ENCOUNTER WITH THE ZETONS

Despite the fact that we were enclosed in atmosphere suits, only the most insensitive and unperceptive individual could have escaped noticing a strange tenseness, amounting almost to a physical tingling, in the air.

"Give you the creeps, doesn't it?" asked Tubby, casting yet another glance towards the never-ceasing lightning-play high in the sky. "You'd think there'd be an awful row from the thunder, yet I can't hear a thing."

I suppose the point escaped my observation because we'd had other things to think about recently; now it had been brought home to me I shuddered anew. Of the many uncanny and objectionable planets to which Inter-X work had led us, Zeton was definitely the worst.

"Chalk up another item to ionisation," suggested young Hartnell. "I expect the discharges pass easily through activated air instead of ripping their way through resistant gases, as they have to do in a normal thunderstorm, with a lot of sound and fury."

Plausible, matter-of-fact explanations did little to restore my peace of mind. Nevertheless, a job of exploration lay before us and we might just as well get on with it as stand around wearing ourselves into a state of nervous exhaustion.

"Which way?" I asked. "Towards the city?"

Hartnell nodded. "Let's make a detour, though. No doubt some of the natives'll be rushing out to see what our arrival's all about. Better for us to see 'em first than be caught unawares ourselves."

On such sound, simple strategy is built much Inter-X success. Unless they possessed abnormal cunning or, on the other hand, exceptional timidity, the inhabitants of Zeton would naturally make a bee-line for the spot where *Little Growler* landed. Reasonable presumption that they would

travel from the direction of their dwellings provided us with fairly accurate foreknowledge of which route they would take; consequently, were we to deviate slightly to either side of the direct path and take advantage of what cover the terrain offered, any element of surprise would be ours.

Such tactics are more important than they appear superficially, for what kind of creatures might we encounter? Obviously, no one yet knew. Perhaps a form of life which, by its bizarre or frightening appearance, might momentarily root us to the spot with astonishment—and that lost second could possibly have fatal consequences.

Maintaining a careful, apprehensive look-out, we progressed swiftly.

Low-growing scrub soon gave way to more profuse vegetation, flourishing in softer, richer soil. Leaves of most plants, I noticed, were hard and highly-polished, but Hartnell and Tubby allowed me no time for investigation, apart from clipping a few items for my specimen boxes.

False alarms proved frequent. Once we crouched behind a clump of bushes waiting to see what had caused a diagonal streak of movement across undergrowth on a small slope well within our field of view, but it turned out to be merely foliage agitated by a gentle breeze.

Then we came across another patch of sand, fully a hundred yards across, surrounded by small trees, some of which showed unmistakable signs of having been torn asunder by lightning. Fierce currents, seeking passage to earth, had ripped their way through moist, tender wood lying immediately behind the bark, leaving the trunk hollow and semi-circular to grow on as best it might.

"Storms don't always keep themselves to the ionosphere, apparently," I said.

Hartnell shrugged. "Can you wonder?"

"Look at this, too," said Tubby, examining a strange, discoloured spot some few feet away. It seemed like an outcrop of greenish-brown, shiny stone.

"Sweet Sirius!" exclaimed Hartnell. "That's a good one, all right! It's actually fused the ground!"

I prodded the solidified lump with my boot, finding it heavy and solid. "Absolutely boiled into glass."

"Here's another!" announced Tubby. "And another!" He paused baffled. "Why, this place is full of 'em!"

I craned my neck to look once more at the flickering sky. However much the lightning preferred this spot to strike, there seemed little danger at the moment. But where electricity was concerned did anybody ever know where. . . ? "I vote we press on," I said.

Young Hartnell chuckled, wordlessly leading the way again. Yet in a very short time a regular, rhythmic disturbance broke out about a hundred yards to the left.

"Down!" I snapped. "Definitely animals of some sort coming this time! Keep hidden and wait till they break cover over that open patch!"

Approaching rustle of leaves grew louder and somehow more peculiar until at last, with a violent shouldering aside of branches, they emerged.

Tubby whistled softly. "What in Andromeda have we stumbled on now?"

He might well ask. The things that heaved themselves in single file from the bushes bore quite distinct resemblance to marine creatures known on Earth as starfish, except that they were infinitely larger—at least ten feet from point to point—and boasted six 'arms.' Nor did they crawl in humble fashion close to the ground but pulled themselves forward by alternate exercise of their limbs working in threes. This method of progression raised and lowered the lumpy, pinkish-grey central portions of their bodies in quick succession, while two eyes on long, curved stalks swayed continuously in compensating motion, apparently maintaining an even field of view.

There were twelve altogether, but I was so busy studying and counting that not until they halted in the centre of that open space did I notice one of them to be different. Without seeming in any way mutilated, this animal in the middle of their group possessed only five 'arms,' although it moved in a manner similar to the others.

"I shouldn't think these are from the city," said Tubby, doubtfully. "Probably some of the local fauna."

It is on occasions such as this that Inter-X regulations create difficulty for personnel. Those familiar with the complicated and rigid rules under which we operate will know that the ban on using speed-gamma pistols in self-protection applies only to taking intelligent life. But upon a planet where life-forms have developed quite differently from elsewhere, how can one immediately be sure whether a creature possesses intelligence?

There have, in fact, been several instances of incautious spacemen trustingly approaching a seemingly harmless animal, only to meet a brutal and ferocious death. Obvious and elementary precautions—such as noticing (1) whether items of adornment or clothing are worn, (2) whether method is employed in various activities or (3) whether lesser fauna are exploited to benefit a master-race—do not always indicate intelligence, although all these factors are a reasonable guide. Inter-X does not officially recognise intelligence as being present until there is evidence of rational and reasoned behaviour.

Yet we became certain fairly quickly that the things we observed rated moderately high in the scale. They manoeuvred strangely but purposefully near the creature with only five arms until eventually it stood alone with the others in a semi-circle some fifteen or twenty yards distant.

"What's all this in aid of?" wondered Hartnell. (We were speaking, of course, on the atmosphere suit inter-com sets, so that no sound reached the starfish, even supposing they could hear.)

There was a good deal of arm-waving, the purpose of which we could not even begin to understand. Then three of the squad detached themselves to line up, one arm of each linked to an arm of the others, facing that solitary figure.

Upon a very definite signal from a creature at the end of the main body, these three raised others of their arms and pointed. The five-armed Zeton—I suppose we might as well begin to call them by their racial name—bunched his supports

together and perched himself on the tips in a movement which was somehow proud and at the same time defiant.

Then the leader repeated his signal—and what happened shook us to the core.

From those three extended arms shot vivid, bluish lightning bolts, concentrated upon the target so accurately that the five-armed figure momentarily disappeared in a dazzling blaze that lasted fully a second. But when the almost blinding, prolonged flash disappeared—there he stood, obviously unharmed.

"Almighty Altair!" gasped Hartnell. "What sort of ceremony's this?"

I couldn't help him—only goggle open-mouthed through interstices in the hard, shiny foliage.

Now the six-armed Zetons moved round in some kind of altered formation, until seven stood facing the 'odd man out,' with the leader slightly to one side and the three remaining individuals to the rear. We had no means of knowing whether these were the three responsible for that breath-taking display of electrical fireworks, but in any case their performance was to be eclipsed by what came shortly afterwards.

The seven proceeded to repeat the same linked-arms manoeuvre carried out previously by the three. Yet before the full significance dawned upon us, so that we might understand what was happening, the row of Zetons each raised a disengaged arm and pointed again at the one which still stood alone on the sand.

Instantly upon the leader's signal there burst forth a flash so terribly vivid and powerful—far more dazzling than the trio's effort—that for an instant the shadows cast from trees by the steadily flickering sky were flung into reverse and the automatic anti-glare filters in our helmet-visors momentarily clicked into position.

When we had overcome temporary surprise and looked again upon the scene that solitary figure had vanished. All that remained was a small heap of slightly smoking tissue which quivered briefly, then lay still.

"Jolly little fellows, aren't they?" asked Hartnell, grimly.

"See the tree at the back?" I asked. "It's been split like the others we saw." True enough, the shattered wood still smouldered where a stray bolt had struck—while beside that pile of disintegrated flesh the sand had been fused into another patch of greenish-brown glass.

Tubby, never quite so fast of understanding in some things as Hartnell and myself, although his cameras had been turning the whole time, gasped "Great Gemini! We've been looking at an execution!" I shall never forget the look of horror on his round face, though for all I knew his features might have mirrored my own.

We crouched lower behind the bushes, experiencing physical nausea, watching the Zetons scrape a shallow grave in the soft earth and bury the remains of their victim. The lump of fused sand was hauled out, carried to the spot and stamped into the ground after the manner of a flat tombstone.

"A place of execution," I said, "and each of those chunks of artificial quartz shows where one's buried!"

Their sickening task completed, the Zetons resumed single file behind their leader and lolloped away with queer, humping strides, leaving us alone once more in the clearing—now, it seemed to our somewhat fevered imaginations, peopled by the sorrowful ghosts of five-armed victims who had met their doom among the shattered trees.

I suppose it would have appeared peculiar to our primitive forefathers that three grown men, long used to strange sights on planets far across the void, should have found themselves so upset about the death of one grotesque animal on a highly undesirable world. Yet our emotions merely reflected the environment in which we had matured—for want of a better word, the 'humanity' of our times. Since modern civilisation emerged from the chaos and brutality of the twentieth century, emphasis has been laid upon the sanctity of intelligent life, as witness the much-debated Inter-X rules, taking note as they do not only of human life but placing other intelligent creatures on an equal plane, irrespective of advanced or primitive culture.

"But why?" asked Tubby, plaintively. "Why did they do it?"

Hartnell, who is definitely the least emotional among us, said: "They probably considered he deserved it. I'm not so much concerned about 'why' as 'how.' None of the firing squad carried weapons, as far as I saw."

Tubby, you will remember, is a photographer; Hartnell a physicist. Study of things resembling starfish doesn't come into my calling as a botanist, but I suppose that because of my profession a little zoology has been learned in various biological studies.

"They didn't have pistols or anything," I said, slowly. "Don't forget we're on what might be described as an electrical world. . . ."

"So I'd noticed," remarked Hartnell, with a faint grin.

" . . . and for that reason phenomena already accepted as quite reasonable elsewhere are intensified on Zeton. Even back on Earth we've fishes—some varieties of eels, I believe—that use electric shocks to stun their prey. From what I've heard the jolts are pretty terrific, too. Now why is it outlandish that similar creatures—on a world positively bursting with electricity—should possess potentials in their bodies sufficient to discharge through half-ionised air? At least," I added, defensively, to forestall criticism, "that's my theory."

"You cautious old so-and-so!" grinned Hartnell. "Seriously, though, I wouldn't be surprised if you're right, Pop. I've read about the things you mention. Apparently most of 'em can loose off shocks at will—so why not the Zetons?"

Tubby checked his push-button camera controls and rose with a sigh from where we had been squatting. "Hope this ionisation isn't too strong, else my pictures'll be ruined."

"Come on," said Hartnell. "Inter-X duty calls us! Let's follow in the wake of that lot and trust they don't shoot off any lightning bolts while Pop's got the Mattus rod in his hand."

There was no guffawing or leg-pulling this time. The sight

of that peculiar execution and the enormously high voltages employed by the Zetons had sobered us considerably. Given similar discharges, deliberately aimed at so vulnerable a conductor as a Mattus, a man might easily be cooked to a crisp inside his suit.

"You know, Pop," said young Hartnell, thoughtfully, when we moved silently as possible through the undergrowth, keeping a sharp look-out for suspicious movements, "it's hardly fair for this Mattus job to fall on you every time. It must be a strain keeping up concentration—remember how you sweated during that business on Orbis?—and I think we ought to take it in turns."

His motive was so transparent that, while at the same time deeply moved, I chuckled. "Look here, you wouldn't offer to help when things were tough—never a murmur of consideration for your elders and betters. Now, when things are likely to be easier, you very promptly volunteer to take a turn."

"Easier?" he repeated, puzzled.

"Why not? Doesn't the Mattus work by absorbing minute electrical impulses transmitted by a subject's brain. Isn't it obvious that reception will be a lot better through semi-ionised air that's a good conductor of electricity instead of in ordinary conditions, when it's a resistor?"

"Hm," he said, and let the matter drop.

My argument was a lot of nonsense, of course, and I'm sure Hartnell knew it. Yet he was also aware that I'd perceived the real reason for his offer—which wasn't to ease the strain of my duties as Mattus operator but share the very real perils we'd been joking about only a short time previously.

Eventually we perceived paths striking through the woods. These we skirted carefully, finally sighting the city by means of cautious observations through the trees, which now grew a good forty or fifty feet high. Under cover we felt reasonably secure from surprise; in the near future we must reveal ourselves by stepping into a cleared belt of low bushes and crazy geometrical designs of paths that networked wide spaces separating us from the nearest dwellings.

Buildings proved much larger than we had thought from our brief glimpse as *Little Growler* came in to land. In shape they were semi-circular, looking as though huge cylinders had been bisected and the halves laid to the ground, curved surface uppermost. The tubes, thus converted into a kind of tunnel, spread for miles, with others endlessly joining and interlocking at weird angles. Here and there, undoubtedly marking principal junctions of some kind, rose round towers with flat, circular roofs. No sign of life showed itself—no movement or smudge of smoke. And over it all the electric tempests blazed and flickered, bathing the city in their horrible light.

"Do you know what I think?" said young Hartnell, as we paused behind our last line of protecting undergrowth and surveyed this strange scene dubiously.

Tubby and I made noises of inquiry.

"If you ask me, we'd do better to go back to the ship." He adopted a soft, persuasive tone of voice which seems to come to him naturally at times. "Look at it this way. When we stick our noses outside there's no telling what sort of Zeton will spot us first. Maybe it will prove some ignorant so-and-so who'll promptly loose off his entire power station at us. On the other hand, any party that's been despatched to find *Little Growler* will be prepared for something peculiar and may stop to chat with us a little before they shoot."

"I don't like being described as 'something peculiar,'" complained Tubby.

"You think they will shoot—sooner or later?" I asked.

"If you were twice as handsome," said young Hartnell, dealing with queries in chronological order, "you'd still look peculiar to them, however attractive a hostess in some Z-bar might find you. As for shooting, Pop, we've already seen enough to know they're a primitive and belligerent race."

We talked the matter over a little longer and decided that Hartnell's suggestion contained sound sense. Personally, though, I wished he'd hit upon the idea before we'd walked eight or nine miles to where we now stood.

"Maybe we won't need to go all the way," he said, com-

fortingly. "We locked up *Little Growler* securely, so that they can't get inside or do any damage, and they're probably on their way back right now."

"No doubt feeling highly annoyed and ready to take it out on somebody," remarked Tubby, pessimistically. "Most likely us!"

As it turned out, they were both partially correct. We met the Zeton exploration party unexpectedly at the corner of a narrow trail nearly two miles from the ship. Hartnell, who was leading, halted so abruptly that I nearly collided with him, but the foremost Zeton showed no such surprise. I remember thinking how they must have spotted us beforehand, although subsequent events were so swift and dramatic that I had no time to determine whether more of them actually came up behind us.

Hartnell raised his hand in the universal signal of peace and friendship, but I don't think it meant much to them. Then he pointed to himself and also in the direction of the ship. They understood that all right and began to gesture furiously among themselves. On some occasions one of the six arms was extended in our direction and I tensed myself involuntarily, waiting for the flash and shock of an electrical discharge.

"We're not making much progress, Pop," said Tubby. "Think it's safe to try the Mattus?"

Much as I disliked the idea, I supposed it was inevitable. There seemed no other method of establishing communication. But before I could extend the telescopic receiving rod, three or four of them grabbed us simultaneously with surprising power and swung us round facing the way we had come, urging us once more in the direction of the city.

"I hope your idea's going to work all right," I told young Hartnell. "What's next on the programme, do you think?"

"At least they haven't killed us out of hand. . . ."

"I'll feel better," said Tubby, in his quiet way placing a finger on the crux of the situation, "when we're safely past that execution site!"

Truth to tell, all three of us experienced a few qualms,

especially when from time to time one of the Zetons—they numbered about twenty, all told—thought we were straying from the path and fired a bolt into the ground near our feet. The first time this happened I nearly jumped out of my atmosphere suit with surprise, although I felt no actual, physical shock. It soon became evident, though, that a comparatively small amount of power was being employed.

"Like cattle," said Hartnell, bitterly, "being kept in line with electrical whip-cracks! You know, Inter-X sometimes asks for more self-control than is humanly possible!"

This time there was no hesitancy at the fringe of trees skirting the city. We were hustled smartly across the open space to a door at one end of the tube-like edifices and here received our first demonstration of the Zeton's electro-mechanical ingenuity.

The leader tugged at a small piece of metal like a queerly-fashioned lever, whereupon the door—a 15-foot high affair occupying the entire semi-circular end of the building—divided itself into two like a fan, the sections moving silently on some sort of central pivot into slots beneath ground level. Once inside, the door closed again behind us.

Over the microphone I heard Hartnell draw a deep breath. "Who says they're not civilised?"

"It depends what you mean by civilised," I remarked. "Intelligent, yes. But civilised? Not after that execution we saw out there."

"Don't split hairs, Pop!" I thought he sounded a little testy. "Could you see how it was done?"

"Not the slightest idea," I confessed.

The wide tunnels—built, I thought, from some kind of dull, smooth metal—extended and sub-divided endlessly. We were hustled onwards remorselessly, and truth to tell we had difficulty in keeping pace with our escort's lolloping gait. Many times we passed what looked like other doors, but the workmanship was so excellent that a cursory glance could not distinguish between blank end-walls and sections which parted to allow of entrance. Lighting issued from long,

dimly illuminated tubes in the roof, giving an almost phosphorescent effect, for the tunnels possessed no windows.

At length we were halted. Another door bisected itself into the floor, revealing a semi-circular room with no other exit. They shoved us inside and departed.

CHAPTER FIVE

"I SAW HIM! NOT A ZETON—A MAN!"

"Well," said Hartnell, with his usual infuriating calmness in such circumstances, "since we're here I don't see why we shouldn't make ourselves comfortable."

I don't mind admitting that I was scared. Certainly, we'd been in almost identical situations before, yet somehow the Zetons—far more advanced than other intelligent creatures we had come across for a long time—filled me with particular apprehension. If and when I succeeded in operating the Mattus we might learn more about them, but personally I considered them unalluring subjects.

Lost in such pessimistic thoughts, I emerged with a start to find those two young devil-may-cares seated on the floor, their backs propped against the wall and their helmets flung back.

"Snap out of your day-dream, Pop, and take a sniff of ozone," said Tubby. "Healthful, they say."

I considered our present position far from healthful, and said so. "Might as well save oxygen, anyhow," I admitted. "This looks like being a long job." I slipped off my helmet and sniffed suspiciously. Air in the cell was musty but not otherwise unpleasant.

For a time we stayed silent.

"When they locked us up on Krellig," began Tubby, reminiscently, "we managed to knock a hole in the wall."

He heaved himself to his feet and sounded the curved surface. It emitted a soft, ringing sound. "Metal, all right." He prowled round to the door, then stopped. I saw his body

stiffen. "Metal! Hey, get away from there! If lightning struck it might burn you—even through that suit!"

Hartnell coolly raised his eyes, not otherwise moving. "How many more times do I have to rub it in that electricity always takes the easiest path? Of course the walls are metal! This place must have been struck hundreds of times—and the potential is neatly earthed through the buildings without causing much damage."

"I'm not saying you're wrong—but sooner you sitting there than me!" Whereupon Tubby promptly curled up in the precise centre of the cell and calmly went to sleep.

"We ought to get some rest ourselves," said Hartnell. "No telling when we'll have another chance."

"What about that door or the light—aren't you going to find out how they work?"

"Time for that later," he yawned. "G'night, Pop."

But he was not to get to sleep just then. The door opened again, silently and swiftly, to admit a Zeton bearing a metal tray on which reposed several bowls of food and water.

First query that sprang to my mind, inconsequentially enough, was how he managed to avoid spilling the load in view of his awkward gait. He succeeded, however, in placing the tray on the floor, afterwards withdrawing to the main corridor, where others of his kind lurked, obviously ready to forestall any attempted dash for freedom. Only as sections of the door rose to shut him from view did I realise that he had but five arms, similar to the creature who had been deliberately reduced to smoking pulp in that sandy graveyard among the trees.

But my last glance beyond the confines of our prison revealed something so fantastic, so utterly and completely incredible that I felt the hairs rise prickling in the nape of my neck.

The fan-like doors closed and after what seemed an age I tore away my bulging gaze. All strength had ebbed from my legs and icy sweat trickled down my chest. Feeling welcome support from the wall as I tottered backwards, I let my knees buckle and slid limply to the floor.

Tubby, awakened by our strange visitor, stared round inquiringly.

"You're looking pale, Pop," said Hartnell. "Don't you like this supper the nice Zetons have brought you?"

Lifting one of the bowls, he rotated it so that the unappetising contents—fibres and vegetable pulp intended as some kind of stew, for the mixture was warm—swilled round in revolting fashion.

I shook my head weakly. His frivolous action had done little to ease my queasy stomach. He must have realised something was wrong, however, for with a sudden expression of concern he put the bowl aside and said: "What's the matter?"

Wordlessly, I pointed to the door, wondering how I might persuade the others to believe me. "Out there—the guards in the corridor—they had a man with them!"

"A man?"

"But that's impossible!"

"All right," I said, trying to adopt a cynical grin but succeeding only in achieving a foolish, vacant smile. "I never expected you to believe me, anyway!"

Both corrugated their brows in puzzlement. "How would a man get here? Aren't we the first in this corner of space? Isn't Inter-X always first on the scene?"

"I don't know how he got here—maybe he's a renegade spaceman or something. All I can tell you was that he stood there with the Zetons—looking at us."

They chewed this over in silence for a little time.

"What was he wearing?" asked Hartnell, at last.

"I couldn't see properly."

"Did it look like any kind of uniform?"

"No," I said, "definitely not."

"Then he'd hardly be a runaway from some space crew."

"Not unless he had ordinary clothes hidden somewhere in readiness," put in Tubby, wisely.

"I couldn't see his face very clearly in that dim light," I continued. "He was a little below average height and not

particularly broad-shouldered. That's all I know—but I'll swear it was a man."

Chin sunk upon his chest in concentration, Hartnell paced up and down like a caged animal. Finally, he looked up and said: "You know, Pop, I think you're right!"

Tubby gaped. "What's changed your mind?"

"Those bowls. Look—there's that horrible stew in three of them, but the others are filled with water."

"Well?"

"Ask yourself a question: how should the Zetons know what we eat and drink?"

"Maybe it's the sort of stuff they live on themselves."

"Served up in bowls?" asked young Hartnell, softly. "Don't you see it means two things—first, they wouldn't feed us this stuff unless someone had told them it's more or less the diet we require; second, they wouldn't bother to feed us at all if they intended to electrocute us. You see what it implies?"

"Yes," said Tubby, his mind working more quickly than usual in time of crisis. "It means somebody's told 'em something—that chap out there with 'em!"

"He might have told them a bit too much," I said, meaningly.

"Arguing won't get us anywhere at the moment," declared Hartnell, at last. "I'm going to get some sleep."

Even though I felt incapable of closing an eye because of the raging tumult of speculation in my mind, I suppose I must have dozed. When I awoke, four Zetons—the six-armed variety—stood in the room, looking from one to the other of us with their curious, stalk-suspended eyes.

Hartnell or Tubby must have been aware of their coming, because they had resumed their helmets and one of them had thoughtfully placed my own headpiece in position. Perhaps it was this action which roused me.

"I don't know what their idea is," said Tubby, "but it seems to me the right time to get the Mattus going."

Brief reflection admitted the worth of his suggestion. Enclosed in these tunnel-like corridors—and remembering

Hartnell's quite reasonable theory that the metal surfaces successfully earthed stray lightning bolts from overhead electric tempests—the machine might be used far more safely than in the open.

I hoped fervently that the Zetons would not misinterpret movement of the telescopic rod, although fortunately—after a number of unpleasant accidents due to startled creatures mistaking the Mattus for some kind of offensive weapon—latest modifications enable it to be extended slowly instead of snapping out at the touch of a button.

This I did, pointing the rod unobtrusively at the floor, so imperceptibly that they failed to notice the operation.

The Zetons had been busy, meanwhile, in subjecting us to prolonged, silent scrutiny in a way which made us positively wriggle with embarrassment.

"No I know what animals feel like in a zoo," said young Hartnell. "It wouldn't be so bad if they expressed an opinion or something, instead of just swinging their eyeballs up and down."

"Whatever they do," I said, "I hope they won't loose off any lightning. I'm just going to switch on."

But when I pressed the button inside my glove I felt almost as though struck by one of those sizzling blue bolts, for immediately—without my raising the receiver rod—thought images crowded in upon my mind thick and fast. Indeed, for a few seconds I had no time to sort them out and was forced by astonishment to remain passive, accepting general impressions—curiosity, mainly, with vague undercurrents of arrogance and boastfulness. I sensed cruelty, too—a certain impersonal, pitiless brutality. What disturbed me most—and proved also their limitations—was the arrogance, born of these six-armed creatures' obvious belief that their civilisation and scientific knowledge was superior to all others. We'd come across this misguided, intolerant outlook before. I didn't like it a little bit. It invariably meant trouble.

For the time being, therefore, I eavesdropped on the Zetons' discussions. I had achieved quite an accurate forecast in my rather wild speculation that the Mattus might

operate more efficiently in semi-ionised air, and I took early opportunity of telling Hartnell so.

He seemed abnormally gratified—so greatly, indeed, that I took time out to inquire the reason.

"Blazing Betelguese! Don't you see we've made an astounding scientific discovery? As a rule the thing has to be shoved in people's faces to get near enough for reception, doesn't it? And even then it's often difficult. In future, when they're getting down to important sessions at headquarters, exchanging mathematical formulæ and other tricky stuff, all they need do is ionise the atmosphere and get rid of half the troubles they have in working the machine now."

Frankly, this had quite escaped me. True enough, the Mattus is manufactured in both portable and laboratory models. Usefulness of the former has many times been demonstrated, but the second type performs invaluable services by speeding and simplifying communication when scientists of different worlds hold consultation.

"Why," gloated Hartnell, with the rosy, irrepressible optimism of youth, "headquarters will rave about the idea. They might even give me a really big job back at base. . . ."

"You'll be glad to get away from us nasty, rough Inter-X people, no doubt," said Tubby, deftly deflating him. "Between trips we'll come and bow in front of your desk. . . ."

"And make rude noises outside the door," I added, backing him up.

Both of us knew, of course, that young Hartnell, despite his frequent grumbles at the stupidity and incompetence of controllers, could no more leave Inter-X than he could stop breathing.

This badinage concluded, I turned attention to the Zetons. Nothing was more certain than that they had received a certain amount of advance information. They were aware, for instance, that we wore suits and that we had reached their planet from somewhere beyond the ionosphere. I received confirmation, too, that I hadn't been suffering from hallucinations when I saw the human figure in the corridor.

The starfish had observed our lips moving behind the transparent morynium facepieces in our helmets and remarked upon this phenomenon with much waving of pinkish-grey arms.

"What we imagined is true," declared one. "They actually exist inside these strange shells, although the others we seized have no outer layer of covering."

Now this I'm prepared to swear—and it shook me considerably. He used the plural! The man outside was merely one of several, then?

It must be understood, of course, that any direct quotation is by way of free translation from mental pictures, but I'm trying to present a clear narrative. First I sensed him regarding the three of us, perceiving inside our suits creatures with which he was familiar; then his memory recalled a dim, momentary glimpse of six or seven other men—some in space-crew uniform, others wearing ordinary clothing. At some time in the past another ship must have landed on Zeton! But where had it come from? Who comprised its passengers?

"Food—air—water—how may they absorb it while shut inside such armour?" Another of the four commenced to nag away at the subject.

"Observe they have not used the food we sent previously."

From these and similar simple comments it became immediately that on Zeton we faced a tougher proposition than any we had so far encountered among alien life-forms. Here was an approach to a problem based upon reason, upon rational and scientific inquiry.

"They exhibit no sign of hostility," remarked the one who had first spoken. (Again let me emphasise that no sound was uttered. We confirmed later what we had previously guessed—that Zetons communicated by means of their agitated arm-waving.)

"If they do not prove amenable," said another, grimly, "we shall easily subdue them. We know already that their bodies are exceptionally weak. Doubtless they encase themselves in this manner for protection."

I badly wanted to overhear something more concerning

'the others' they had mentioned, but the four merely continued to speculate upon our physiology.

It seemed time to bring the Mattus into two-way working, so bracing myself and drawing a deep breath—I don't know why this should aid concentration, but it does—I exerted all my mental force into projecting messages of good will and peaceful intent.

At first they didn't realise what was happening, and there ensued not only even more vigorous signalling with arms but a puzzled wagging of eye-stalks. I moved slightly in order to focus their attention upon myself and redoubled my efforts, at the same time indicating the Mattus as our means of communication.

They seized upon the idea with exceptional swiftness, justifying my earlier impression that their intelligence reached quite a high rating.

Unfortunately, the Zetons expressed no particular anxiety to hear our side of the case. One whom I had no difficulty in identifying as the leader gave an order. "Bring in the other prisoner. Let us compare him with the others when they stand side by side."

I told Hartnell and Tubby what was happening. The former was frankly incredulous. "You mean they're ignoring the Mattus? They actually don't want to talk to us?"

I said I gathered the Zetons hadn't a very high opinion of human beings.

"You can't have worked it right, Pop," complained Tubby, outrageously. "Sure they realise what the Mattus is and what it does?"

"They know all right."

"It's unheard of," said Hartnell, severely. "Who do they think they are?"

We all experienced a quaint sense of humiliation—no less unpleasant because it was unusual. I guessed the reason for this snub, of course. It was the Zetons' overweening arrogance and self-importance.

"Here's that chap I saw—not a very happy-looking specimen, is he?"

Our heads turned almost at the same instant towards the door, through which guards ushered a weedy, cringing individual, haggard of face and with horribly bloodshot eyes, as though he had not slept for days. He positively grovelled at our feet, whining: "Get me out of here! Don't let them touch me again! Make these things let me go! I can't stand it, I tell you!"

One of the Zetons hauled him to his feet, but he straightway fell to his knees again and continued blubbering.

"What's your name? Where do you come from?"

If he heard the question he gave no sign, continually moaning: "Get me out of here! Don't let them torture me again—please—please——!"

Personally, I felt sorry for the poor devil, but Hartnell—quite rightly, as it turned out—had no such qualms. "Stop snivelling and tell us who you are. Who else is with you?" He grabbed the man by the collar and shook him, bringing to me over the Mattus expressions of pleased interest from the Zetons. I began to like them even less. Evidently a violence-loving breed—and we know today that cruelty and true culture never go hand in hand. No doubt they would have been even more delighted to see a good fight break out between us.

"Come on, come on!" snapped Hartnell. "Time's precious! Who are you?"

Finally, the man gasped: "Parsons—Aldo Parsons!"

"How long have you been here?"

"I—I don't know. Months, I suppose."

"Where are the others?"

"Others?" He stared blankly for a moment with those dreadful eyes. "Oh, they're dead, you know—all dead!"

"How did they die?"

Parsons turned a frightened glance towards the four Zetons who stood curiously studying our reactions. "Those—those things there! I saw them—it was awful! They used ten——." This figure possessed for him some appalling significance we could not understand. "Ten!"

"Ten what?"

"Ten Zetons! Oh, it was horrible!"

"They killed them all? Why didn't they kill you?"

He shook his head desperately. "I don't know! Maybe because I didn't resist—."

"You're sure none of them got away?"

"Quite sure, avowed Aldo Parsons. "They're all dead. Everyone—except, of course, the girl!"

CHAPTER SIX

ENTER—SEPTAK OF THE SEVEN ARMS

High drama, indeed, but little time remained for further inquiry. Apparently the Zetons had studied our reactions sufficiently and I got the impression of disappointment that we refrained from tearing one another to pieces.

"They'll kill me, too!" whispered Parsons, overwrought, "unless you help. . . ."

"Strikes me you're half scared to death already," grunted Tubby. "How can we help? And what about this girl?"

"I—I don't know—don't care much. I've got my own neck to think of." He glanced at the Zetons from the corner of his eye, like a frightened animal. His next question made us gape with amazement. "Look here—is any of you an electrical engineer? Could you build a generator?"

I suddenly became aware that I was standing and staring at him, my jaw sagging idiotically.

"A generator?" demanded Hartnell, incredulously. "Isn't there already enough electricity on this horrible forsaken world?"

Parsons started to wring his hands. "I've tried two or three times. I've got to do it! If I don't. . . ."

The Zetons cut short any enlightenment by commencing to hustle us into the corridor. During the excitement of Aldo Parsons' abject grovelling and his peculiar revelations I had found it increasingly impossible to listen and use the Mattus machine at the same time. But now that mental images

crowded in once more I knew with a sinking heart where they were taking us. They had decided we were not worth further trouble. We were headed for the little clearing in the woods—and the execution squad.

And there dawned upon me the dreadful reason for Parsons's preoccupation with the number ten. We had already seen how the Zeton victim successfully resisted shocks from three executioners; I remembered only too well how combined power of seven had been needed to blast the life from him. Small wonder the second and fatal flash proved so unendurably vivid. Now, for ourselves, they intended to use a squad of no fewer than ten!

I dared not mention my suspicions to the others. They would learn soon enough. Had we journeyed so far from our own world and survived the horrors of Zeton's electrified screen, only to meet a quick and miserable end before we had scarcely set foot on the planet?

A sizable contingent of Zetons waited some distance along the corridor. In that dim light, squatting motionless on their six rubbery, pinkish-grey arms, they were indistinguishable from the four who had studied us in the cell, yet somehow I found them more deadly and sinister than any we had previously observed.

Parsons noticed this, too. Probably he had learned methods of recognition during his presence among them. Suddenly he screamed—a wail of utter panic and despair so shrill that it set my teeth on edge. "Stop them! Stop them, I tell you! They're taking us out to kill us!"

"Shut up!" said Hartnell, in a low grating voice. "Shut up—or I'll slap you quiet! We value our skins as much as you do yours, but we aren't getting hysterical about it." In a more normal tone, he asked me: "Think he's right, Pop?"

"Afraid so," I said.

He drew a deep breath. "Well, we've had a good run, anyway. It's been nice knowing you, Pop. You too, Tubby."

"That goes for us, as well."

There was no possible way out, it seemed. Parsons might

survive if he fulfilled the highly peculiar task of constructing an electrical generator—presumably without tools or materials. And what in Sirius did the Zetons need with a generator? Anyway, would they bother to listen to him now?

Interruption was provided by a further squad of Zetons erupting from a side passage and moving rapidly towards us. It quickly became apparent that they escorted a personage of some importance, and when he emerged from their midst I saw the reason. He had seven arms! Could it be that physical characteristics in some manner determined their position in a social scale? A five-armed Zeton, for instance, had performed such a menial task as bringing in those bowls of awful soup—which also meant that the execution we had witnessed might have formed punishment for a rebellious slave. The picture began to grow clearer.

The new arrival caused considerable flurry and via the Mattus I caught several references to "Septak," voiced with mingled apprehension and awe.

The four who had regarded us so disparagingly in the cell now found the tables turned. This time they themselves were hauled up for inspection, and "Septak" didn't seem to approve of their decisions.

"O.K.," I told the others, with no small amount of relief. "We're reprieved!" I spoke also through the outside microphone for Parsons' benefit. The Zetons took no notice, confirming the theory that they were unable to hear sounds.

"They—they're not going to—to kill us?" asked Parsons. The furtive light of understanding in those bloodshot eyes and the way his features twisted with relief were not pretty to watch.

The seven-armed Zeton's displeasure, I gathered, centred upon that confounded question of the generator. The four argued—very respectfully, of course—that despite unusual coverings the other three queer creatures were no different from Parsons. Where he had failed in constructing the desired apparatus, therefore, we could not possibly succeed.

"How can you be sure?" demanded Septak, his 'words' tumbling out in a torrent of reproach. "Have they seen the

workshops? Did you discover some method of communicating with them, that you may be certain? On our own world some men possess knowledge of particular things; other men pursue studies along different channels, learning of other matters. May it not be so with them?"

Hartnell, consumed with curiosity, inquired what went on.

"This generator," I said, highly puzzled. "Septak thinks the interrogation squad have scamped their job. He's giving them a good telling off."

"Well," he remarked, grinning mischievously, "he's certainly got enough arms to do it with!"

Which idiotic remark, of course, was typical. Yet when I came to think about the matter later, it wasn't so far removed from relevance. I hadn't even the remotest clue towards interpreting the weaving patterns whereby Zetons communicated with one another, but was there any reason why an extra arm shouldn't enable Septak to 'out-shout' the others? It was substantiated, also, by the way thought-impressions rushed through the Mattus. Maybe this gift accounted for his superiority, and when I looked at him again I perceived a definite air of authority about him, grotesque though his form might appear to our eyes.

"Workshops!" I muttered. Not much in the way of manufactures had so far met our eyes, apart from the automatic doors and the lighting tubes. But a great many questions remained unanswered. Where had Parsons come from, as well as the men who had been massacred? Where was their ship? And the girl? Why had the slave been executed?

Above all, why were the Zetons so anxious to have a generator. Now I knew a few electrical theories—for instance, that the power the starfish possessed in their bodies ranked as static or natural electricity, as opposed to man-made current of pre-determined voltage produced by power-stations. Such natural generators as electric eels—or the Zetons—could only employ static potentials in straightforward, instantaneous discharges. There existed no method of controlling the power accurately or of employing it to run machines. Electricity

obtained by means of rotating magnetic fields differed from animal current in the same way as water in a running stream—capable of producing power from a water-wheel—differed from water in a still pool. Not until the water flows and operates a turbine is it possible to harness the power.

However, such speculation had of necessity to be postponed. Septak humped himself across to us and once more we endured the scrutiny of stalk-like eyes. The Mattus, still working beautifully and with practically no effort on my part, now presented an intellect of cold, analytical precision, and I took new heart. Not that we were out of trouble by any means—Septak's mind revealed no element of pity—but so long as he considered us of possible use we remained comparatively safe.

The four interrogators had evidently confessed their misguided spurning of the Mattus, for Septak now addressed me with definite inquiry, gesturing towards the receiver rod which I still held unobtrusively behind me. I would have liked to have snapped it shut, but we simply had to know the Zetons' intentions.

For one dreadful moment I thought he intended to touch the metal, and my muscles tensed, fearing a stunning shock. I realised, however, that Septak was not entirely at ease with a strange instrument and far from any prodding contented himself with asking "Can you construct electric generators?"

"Yes," I said, not meaning myself personally—for I had only the haziest notion of mechanics involved—but speaking mainly on Hartnell's behalf. "How large would you require these machines?"

I might also have inquired about tools and materials and how he intended to drive the things, but I decided not to complicate a delicate issue.

Dimensions, voltages and output currents apparently meant nothing to him—surprising, indeed, if they had done so. "Such details will be left to your discretion. Parsons has already made a small model; now we require one sufficiently large to be useful, but this he finds beyond his powers and

we cannot communicate with him to ascertain his difficulties. Tools and materials are available in our workshops."

Lights in the roof flickered irregularly for several seconds.

"It is the rest period," said Septak. "You will learn that we are creatures of method and organisation. So long as you remain here you will observe our laws and customs, deviating from them at your peril. After you have slept a little time and swallowed some of that peculiar food you seem to need, you will be escorted to the workshops and proceed with your task."

So saying, he humped himself back to the company of his escort and they all lolloped away out of sight.

"What's happening?" demanded Aldo Parsons, fearfully. "What are they going to do to us now?"

A guard observed his lips moving and raised an arm menacingly. Parsons flinched and started whimpering again. Apparently the etiquette was for all to remain respectfully motionless while Septak made his exit.

Once the escort had disappeared, we were taken in tow again, being hustled along more corridors to a place where sloping stone ramps slid down as though into the very bowels of Zeton.

"Underground workshops," guessed Hartnell.

The way was still lit by phosphorescent tubes lining the rocky roof, and when we finally ceased to descend there stretched before us a vast gallery fully twenty yards wide and extending as far as the eye could see. Similarly to those tube-like surface ways, roof and walls were curved in half-cylindrical fashion, proving that, apart from anything else, the Zetons could boast some knowledge of engineering principles.

Our destination, however, lay nearer at hand than the end of the cavern. After being shoved along various side passages and down smaller ramps, another fan-like door opened, revealing a cell similar to that in which we had been previously incarcerated.

But with this difference—it was already occupied. Before us, her dark eyes dilated with unbelieving wonder, stood a

girl. And, as young Hartnell said later, with considerable enthusiasm: "What a girl!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

SLAVES OF THE POWER-HOUSE

Admittedly, Ella Jordan (as we learned her name to be) was not looking her best, which was quite understandable in the circumstances. Her long, black hair hung untidily and uncombed; her dress was torn and stained. But she stared at our Zeton escort more with defiance than fear and when the door closed, ran straight to Aldo Parsons, seizing an elbow to help him towards a crudely constructed stool.

The room was also furnished—if the stool, an equally rough table bearing a couple of bowls similar to those containing the first meal offered us in captivity, and a palliasse in the corner, could be called furnishings.

"What have they done to you?" she cried, fiercely protective. "Was it—the torture again?"

Hartnell joined in our comprehensive thrill of horror. What devilment was this? Did it explain Parsons' almost insane terror of the Zetons—his drawn features and bloodshot eyes?

She held a bowl while he drank, looking up at us. "Are you from a ship? Is someone coming to get us away from this awful place?"

"We have a ship," admitted Hartnell. "But there's only the three of us."

I read the flicker of disappointment in her eyes. "Is the ship wrecked? I mean, you must have landed in emergency, like we did." She replaced the bowl on the table.

"No, the ship's safe."

Light of hope dawned in her dark eyes. "You mean—we really can get away?"

"Before long, I hope. We've a job to do first, though."

In normal circumstances I would have thought her expression of puzzlement distinctly pretty. "A job?"

"Collecting information about Zeton. We're from Inter-X."

Understanding came simultaneously to both of them. "I've heard of that," said Ella, with more animation than she had shown so far.

"Me, too." Parsons moistened dry lips with the tip of his tongue. "You carry speed-gammas, don't you? We could shoot our way out easily enough." I saw his weak chin trembling. "Those devils deserve it after what they did to me . . ."

Hartnell shook his head decisively. "Speed-gammas can't be used on Zetons. Regulations forbid it."

Parsons leapt to his feet, haggard countenance working convulsively. "All I've suffered—and no revenge? Why, you don't think I'm standing for that, do you? Not getting some of my own back? Look here . . ."

Hartnell shoved him back on the stool. "You're with an Inter-X party now. You'll abide by Inter-X rules and accept our orders. And you'll like it!" He glanced at the girl and added, in a low voice, "That goes for you, too, Miss Jordan. Sorry."

Her answer came quietly, almost with dignity. "I understand. I'm prepared to do as you say."

I shut off my outside amplifier, speaking to Hartnell and Tubby on the inter-com. "The girl's worth two of that snivelling object. We're going to have trouble with him, if you ask me."

"He isn't worth bothering about," said Hartnell, contemptuously.

Fear is a strange emotion. To feel afraid doesn't necessarily imply cowardice, which arises from individual reaction to fear—whether a man surrenders to dread or faces it with courage. I remember occasions when I've been absolutely scared out of my wits, and although I don't consider myself particularly brave, I hope I've never behaved like Aldo Parsons. Hartnell and Tubby are two of those unusual people whose perception of fear is less acute, and I once got into a highly academic argument with a friend at head-

quarters about whether an individual with sensitive appreciation of danger who nevertheless performs a ticklish duty is more deserving of praise than one with the proverbial 'nerves of steel' who carries out an exactly similar task. All I know is that in a tight corner I'd rather have young Hartnell and Tubby at my side than anyone else.

"We were heading for Karah II," the girl was saying. "I suppose you know that's in the outer orbits of Eta Herculis? I'd been transferred to Production Records at the big tritium refinery there to do some special research statistics . . ."

Parsons had stretched himself on the mattress and appeared to be sleeping.

"It was *Liner* 1026. You may have heard by now that it's reported missing." Her eyes were hopeful, questioning—seeking some crumb of comfort from knowledge that the outside universe had become aware of her plight and was already scouring the spaceways to provide succour.

Old Growler's controllers would certainly have received notice that the ship was overdue, but it meant little to us.

"Rumours had been going round for two or three weeks. You know—the usual idle gossip of idle passengers. The stewardess had heard it from a space-crew barman who'd been told by an assistant navigator who'd heard from a maintenance engineer that he thought there was trouble with the engines. As matters turned out, they were half-right." She paused and cast a glance at the man. "Aldo probably knows the details better than I do. Early one morning a steering engine blew out. A lot of the crew and passengers were killed before automatic bulkheads closed. We were badly off course and the only way they could correct it was by dismantling one of the rear engines and using some of the jets for steering."

"Ingenious," commented Hartnell. "Why didn't it work?"

She shook her head. "I don't really know. In the lifeboat afterwards they said the maintenance engineers lost their nerve and rushed the work too much. The second

explosion blew the ship practically in half. I don't recollect a single thing that happened, except coming round to find our Section Officer and another woman passenger bending over me. They said I'd been unconscious for hours. Ten of us were left, all more or less injured."

There had followed many despairing weeks while wreckage in which they were imprisoned floated through space in its predetermined orbit—a path curving endlessly across the void and unalterable save by application of outside forces. It was a predicament that might well have disturbed the reason of many strong men, let alone a refined and intelligent girl.

Then at last the survivors found themselves nearing Zeton and its terrifying electrical screen. Food had practically gone, water was low. Launching their one remaining lifeboat—fortunately the Section Officer was present to handle technical details and plot a course—they dived into the ionosphere.

I think we all know by this time precisely what that means. Small wonder that Aldo Parsons collapsed while staring with horrified fascination into the viewing screen.

Yet it was this weakness which by a quirk of fate saved his life—and also that of Ella Jordan. She had helped him to a bunk and was watching over him when they landed, remaining at her post when all the others climbed out to set foot joyously on solid ground and breathe air that must have smelt delightful after the exhausted, continually re-filtered gases which had sustained them for so long.

Here it was, beside their little ship, that the Zetons came upon them and, at the first sign of resistance, remorselessly slaughtered the entire party.

Parsons and the girl had been discovered later. Paralyzed by dread and obviously incapable of violence, the starfish had spared them for preservation as curiosities.

"The lifeboat?" asked Tubby. "It's still there?"

Ella shook her head. "We think the Zetons tampered with the controls. It burst into flames suddenly. I managed to see the place a few weeks ago. There's only a lump or two of debris left."

"But however did you find food?" I said. "And what's this generator Parsons made for them?"

She shuddered. "It was horrible, horrible! To have them pawing us all the time—and expecting every instant that one of those dreadful shots of lightning might hit us." After a moment, while we all stared at her intently, waiting, she went on: "For a time they treated us—well, as a sort of novelty, I suppose, but it didn't take them long to get tired. We tried to talk to them by signs, but it wasn't much use—in fact we had an awful job trying to show them the kind of food we needed."

My eyes strayed to the bowls on the table, and Ella Jordan smiled ruefully. "Not very appetising, is it? We couldn't eat it at first—but it's surprising what you're grateful for when you're really hungry."

"The Zetons," said Hartnell. "What do they live on?"

"They have a kind of lichen that smells dreadfully—and little pink slug things that they eat alive. I don't know what they feed the slaves with—"

I reproached myself suddenly for lack of hospitality. "Here, have a couple of our tablets—they don't taste much, but they make the equivalent of a full-scale meal."

When she had swallowed them gratefully, I went on: "By slaves, I suppose you mean the five-armed ones."

She nodded, and her forehead furrowed as though at some unpleasant recollection. "There must be thousands of them working in the chemical foundries—huge places built right down in the earth."

"These corridors aren't exactly in the open air."

"We're still on the higher levels. The workshops and power stations lie a long way below."

The power stations? In what way could these link up with Septak's demand that we should build him a generator? I wondered in any case where the Zetons obtained current for lighting, and as I glanced involuntarily at the glowing tubes overhead their radiance faded, leaving us for a second in pitch darkness.

"That's the signal," said Ella. "It means the rest period's over. They'll be coming for us soon."

She walked across to the mattress and roused Parsons. He sat up and gazed vacantly round the room, scratching himself slowly the while. He was not a pleasant sight.

Then the door opened to admit Zetons, escorting yet another authoritative, seven-armed creature who hopped confidently towards me, obviously with the intention of issuing orders. For a moment I thought it was Septak, but as soon as the Mattus began to operate I knew otherwise.

"I am Tanara!"

I felt by no means easy. Septak had treated us with impersonal disdain; this other leading Zeton made no secret of his active dislike.

"Follow the guards. We are taking you to our workshops."

I translated verbally and we all moved forward, five human beings walking more or less steadily among the gang of humping, heaving Zetons.

For some time I'd been aware that Parsons had something on his mind. "Look here," he blurted at last, "how do you know so much about what they're doing? What's that thing you're carrying?"

I explained the functions of the Mattus, making his eyes almost pop out with disbelief. Then he relapsed into silence, but I could nearly hear him thinking.

Our progress along wide corridors and down steep ramps described a bewildering path. There seemed no hope of memorising the route in case we wished to find our way back alone, so I amused myself for a time eavesdropping upon the incautious thoughts of our escort. In the main, their opinions of us were not flattering.

Occasionally, as we descended to lower levels, we passed gangs of five-armed Zetons, invariably in charge of guards, hopping from place to place in pursuance of their duties. Once, when we halted at a cross-section to allow a long procession of them to pass, I tried to sound them with the Mattus, but the only reception was an indescribable sensation

of dull, animal despair. The five-armed creatures were slaves all right. They possessed a true slave mentality—hopelessness, blind obedience and fear of their masters.

Evidence of Zeton civilisation increased as we progressed. Lighting tubes no longer glowed dimly in the roof but shone with gratifying brilliance from decorative niches; the walls became smoother and more polished; eventually strange carvings, whose patterns could be no more than hinted at by human standards, added a semblance of dignity and elaboration to galleries which had previously presented themselves as bare, utilitarian tunnels.

Yet another door revolved sideways and downwards—this time presenting not a further gallery but a segment of peculiar, low-roofed tunnel. What immediately caught our eyes, however, was a series of low platforms, edged with highly involved carvings, reposing on rows of rollers that in turn rested within a shallow trough.

Tanara mounted first—occupying, in accordance with his station, an entire platform to himself—while the guards shoved us higgledy-piggledy upon others and scrambled aboard themselves. Then, to our amazement, the entire contraption started to move—not slowly and smoothly, as might be expected of normal traction, but in a series of jerks, sometimes so violent that only by catching hold of one another could we retain our balance.

“Believe it or not,” I said, as a result of exercising the Mattus, “this is Septak’s private railway! Even the guards are tickled pink by being allowed to ride on it. Not that it’s for our benefit. I gather Tanara wants to save his legs.”

“If this confounded thing goes on rocking,” gasped Hartnell, “he’ll be lucky to save his neck!”

Swaying and lurching, we rolled along for a good twenty minutes, by which time most of the human contingent knew feelings akin to space-sickness. Despite our wobbly knees, however, the Zetons pushed us along with undiminished speed once we had alighted, pressing on confidently along more corridors, although to our eyes no indication of the route was visible.

At last we paused before a door much larger than any we had so far encountered.

"The power station!" whispered Ella, from the corner of her mouth. Already the Zetons had guessed we communicated by moving our lips and only a short time previously had interrupted an animated argument between Hartnell and Tubby by firing bolts into the floor. Neither of them suffered in any way, or even experienced physical shock, but it shut them up all right.

"Yes," repeated Ella. "The power station! I've been here before!"

Power station? No subdued hum of powerful machinery reached our ears—no whine of turbines or throb of great generators.

Tanara paused, addressing me abruptly. "You will behold beyond this door the method whereby Zeton obtains power to run its complex and magnificent civilisation. There are reasons—which will be explained to you in good time—why we must soon obtain an alternative method. The man Parsons had in his possession a strange, tiny machine that our scientists found to emit electricity in small quantities. Obviously, if such a machine is copied on a larger scale, greater amounts of current will be produced." It was a statement—not a question—and I mentally nodded agreement.

"We endeavoured to communicate with Parsons by signs, conveying instructions. He is a fool. Despite all our resources he was unable to build a bigger machine. That is your task. You will fulfil it under supervision in our workshops."

He snapped out these instructions and turned on his heel, as it were, to press a button controlling the door. I tensed myself in anticipation of what we were about to see.

We stepped upon a fenced gallery clinging high to the sides of a rectangular cavern so huge as to be absolutely breath-taking. Along the floor of this vast hall ran thousands of low benches, and parallel with each a bar of shining, copper-coloured metal that eventually disappeared through the far wall. And upon the benches, motionless in countless

rows, lay Zeton slaves—untold multitudes of them—each with one arm stretched out to grip the copper rods. They were feeding electricity from their bodies into the city's wiring systems!

My first amazed reaction could be summed up in one word: "Impossible!" Then, because the procedure was accomplished fact, taking place before our very eyes, I thought again. Why not? Admittedly, static or animal electricity could not be harnessed in the same manner as the machine-made product—but it was certainly true that discharges of current took place. Could not these discharges, given sufficient strength and numbers, be utilised?

As I worked out the organisation in that great hall, I perceived this to be true. More benches ran crosswise at the ends of the cavern, and upon these reclined other Zetons. Occasionally one flinched, whereupon he immediately laid an arm upon a wire connected with the benches alongside that network of great, polished conductors—and the rows of Zetons holding the metal commenced to tremble in sympathy!

The press of a button, apparently at a door somewhere in the city, transmitted a signal to the controlling Zeton. He, in turn, notified the appropriate workers, who exerted sufficient power to operate the mechanism.

Septak's "private railway," too, was explained. No wonder it progressed so uncomfortably by fits and starts! However accurately the slaves timed their electric impulses, they would be unable to merge them with the same controlled smoothness achieved by mechanical current.

We were not allowed long, however, to gaze upon this appalling spectacle. The guards hustled us quickly round the gallery, beyond which we descended yet further ramps and traversed even more subterranean corridors until at length we entered the workshops. Each level of the Zeton city became steadily more sordid, and in this section it was clearly evident that only utilitarian standards counted.

When I remarked upon this, Ella Jordan shuddered, drawing tattered clothing more closely round her, although the

atmosphere was stifling. "Under here," she said, "they have chemical foundries, where they make metal for the buildings on the surface. When you look in there you think you've reached Hell!"

I stole a glance at Parsons, but he had shrunk like a snail into its shell, engaged with thoughts known to none save himself and paying no heed to what went on around him.

The workshop—a busy, clattering, bewildering place—occupied itself in turning out objects in metal and other materials, the purpose of which we did not even dare to guess. From all the weird arrangement of tools and products we could immediately identify only one—great coils of shining wire emerging from a crude machine which a gang of five-armed slaves turned with infinite labour.

Tanara led us to a particular corner and turned to me imperiously. "Here will be found all that you need. In the space of two rest periods I will return. Progress with the generator must then be satisfactory."

I dared to ask a question. "We can construct this machine certainly, but with what shall we feed it?" On the spur of the moment I couldn't think of a better term for motive power. After all, consumption of some material or other was necessary to keep the generator turning.

Yet this simple query shook him outrageously. "Food? The generator actually needs food?"

Obviously, I had to explain. I sought hurried advice from Hartnell. "What's the easiest way to run a generator?"

"If we've got to make everything from scratch, Pop, how about a water turbine?"

Transmission of this to Tanara was greeted with an almost explosive sigh of relief. "Water? That is not a difficult matter. Beyond this cavern runs a large, underground river of inexhaustible supply. This source may be easily tapped."

Strangely curious, I ventured another question, "Why did mention of food cause you such great concern?"

Normally, I suppose, he wouldn't have deigned to answer, but I'd caught him at the right moment. "The entire project hinges upon that," he said, seeming very surprised at

my ignorance. "The city cannot run without electric power and food is not plentiful. Your machine, therefore, will enable us to dispense with many slaves—and consequently with the necessity for feeding them."

I thought of the assembled thousands of five-armed Zetons in that one great power-house alone. There must be many more similar establishments. Although I knew the answer in advance, I could not forbear to ask a third question, and as Tanara spoke I felt my blood run cold.

Quite unemotionally, he said: "They will be destroyed!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

REBELLION STIRS IN THE UNDERWORLD

Aided by the Mattus, bits and pieces of the generator were fairly quickly assembled. I must say, though, that the entire business went very much against the grain for everyone, because the work, while saving our own skins, merely served to speed the time when hordes of Zeton slaves would be led out for execution by those frightening blasts of high-tension current.

"Only consolation," remarked Tubby, "is that one generator can't possibly feed all these gadgets."

"Moreover," I added, "they don't seem to realise that the whole place needs re-wiring and solenoids fitted everywhere before they can use generator current."

"Electricity's just electricity to them," said Hartnell. He grinned, as he always did when the situation became difficult. "Who are we to disillusion the poor creatures so soon? Anyhow, let's show old Tanara we're making progress." He turned to Parsons, who had meanwhile been standing by looking helpless. "What was this small generator you showed the Zetons?"

"From an emergency hand-torch. There's a manual attachment and a high-voltage coil, as well."

We knew the type of thing—a ratchet-operated magneto

which, if storage batteries and all else failed, could produce sufficient current by the operator alternately squeezing and releasing a hand-grip.

"Where is it?"

Needless to say, we had not been left unguarded. I asked the six-armed Zetons to bring it out. After some embarrassed hesitancy, the little apparatus was fetched and laid on the workbench with as much loving ceremony as though it had been a holy relic. I wondered for a moment whether there might be trouble about our sacrilegious handling. Hartnell swore later that the guards' eyes bulged on the ends of their stalks.

"There's a short-circuit somewhere," said Parsons. "Sparks shoot out of the handle when you press it . . ."

Hartnell muttered some utterly irrelevant comment about the torch trying to turn itself into a robot Zeton.

" . . . and it doesn't light up. That's what gave them the idea. They recognised the sparks for electricity and knew enough to show me by signs that a bigger model should make bigger sparks. I—I couldn't understand at first . . ." He covered his face in his hands. "Then they tortured me—it was horrible . . ."

"He's off again," said Tubby.

Ella Jordan, who had been quiet hitherto, flew to the defence. "You've no need to speak in that tone of voice," she said, with asperity. "I know what it was like—I saw them. They fired those awful electrical things at him—stronger and stronger every time, until he couldn't stand it any longer. When he recovered, they began all over again. They only stopped when we guessed what they wanted done."

Now generally I can feel sympathy for weak characters, yet the case of Aldo Parsons left me strangely unmoved. Perhaps it was the whining tone of self-pity which so easily entered his voice; maybe I didn't like the shifty look that sometimes came into his red-rimmed eyes.

"Well," said Hartnell, briskly, "to work! Tanara won't like it unless he sees something solid."

Rotor and field coils from the little generator provided

our patterns. Manufacturing covered wire of the required gauge didn't prove difficult. No iron—as such—was obtainable for the framework and the armature, but a few inquiries and tests produced flat sheets of a peculiar substance that answered the purpose quite well. Hartnell spoke learnedly of “compound haematite processes.”

In their simple way, the Zeton slaves were good workmen. Stacks of laminations were quickly cut; a bed-plate came from the mysterious and unpleasant-sounding ‘chemical foundries’ below; sections of the turbine casing and main wheel materialised with surprising speed.

Much progress, of course, was due to the Mattus, through which I could relay our requirements in graphic fashion for one of the guards to translate it to the five-armed workers by means of a good deal of energetic sign language “occasionally so animated as to cause a cool and refreshing breeze.” (This last phrase, of course, from young Hartnell.)

After a time, however, because of one or two misunderstandings—culminating in some fool prematurely breaking the earth barrier beyond the water inlet pipe and flooding the place ankle-deep with mud and gravel before we could close the valve—I made my contacts direct.

Leader of the machine-shop shift with whom we were engaged turned out to be named Yekolo—a sullen and suspicious individual but a creature of undoubted intelligence, judging by the way in which he perceived how the Mattus operated. Making no secret of the fact that he would willingly wreck the entire project, given half a chance, he gazed at me hatefully across the turbine casing. At the same time, a lively curiosity caused him to ask questions.

“Why came you here, Strange Being? What hope have you, with your four ugly arms, against us with five? Let alone the six-armed guards or Septak and Tanara, with seven?”

The significance of this peculiar comparison was not fully evident at the time, and my feeble efforts to convey to him whence we travelled were interrupted by operations aimed at sliding home the big turbine rotor, crude but effective water-buckets riveted round its circumference.

"Four arms or not," grated Yekolo, "you have brought disaster upon me and my kind this day! It could have been no greater had you possessed a thousand arms!"

A thrill of horror tingled along my spine. "You know? You know they intend to kill all those who work in the power-houses?"

He laughed bitterly. "Indeed we do!" He said no more, but I sensed sinister and secret intentions. Hatred, mingled with despair and defiance, swirled ominously in that fantastic workshop. It seemed impossible that the guards, despite absence of a Mattus thought-transferer, could fail to observe such intense, focused hostility. Perhaps they did, but familiarity had long since bred contempt, so that they felt secure in their superior status.

At last everything was ready for tests—not genuine trials but mainly a mechanical experiment to ensure that shafts turned smoothly. The turbine was finished, laminated field coils wound and the armature windings temporarily connected to slip-rings. We heard water gush through the inlet pipe. The main wheel swung delightfully into medium speed—"Humming like a honey-bee" in Tubby's phrase—and the generator rotor spun with a gentle sighing sound despite improvised bearings.

"I've earthed one side of the output," said Hartnell, "so watch out for that other contact." He cocked an ear, listening to the generator's song. "Think she's O.K.?"

The Zeton guards crowded round in fascinated delight.

"Keep 'em clear, Pop, or they'll be getting a shot of electricity they don't bargain for. I'm not happy about the slip-ring connections."

The whole job, of course, had been carried out very haphazardly without testing-instruments or proper tools. A few calculations on scraps of paper provided our only guide to the machine's voltage or output and the real wonder was that it worked at all. In fact, we were racking our brains to devise some method of utilising the power we had produced—if only for demonstration purposes to please Tanara—when the generator itself took a hand. Insulation broke down some-

where—probably in the suspected slip-rings—and fancy sparks commenced flying across the armature bearings.

"Shut her off!" yelled Tubby.

Personally, I don't think we should ever have got the thing functioning properly, but those fireworks certainly pleased the guards. As for the slave-workers, I observed them torn between admiration and despair, especially Yekolo, who started asking a lot of technical questions. I suppose, harking back to Hartnell's phrase about 'robot Zetons,' it was as though we ourselves had been present in a laboratory where scientists manufactured before our eyes something which bore semblance to a living man. After all, our contraption of shafts and wiring created that same life force which animated the electrical starfish.

"You have wrought great wonders," admitted Yekolo, grudgingly. "I marvel to behold them, though they bear the smell of death. Even so, it is an engine beyond my comprehension."

I couldn't resist trying to explain magnetic principles. Eventually he absorbed the theory of circuits, which, of course, were completely foreign to one whose knowledge concerned only static electricity, but I rammed home to him basic fundamentals of positive and negative poles and the usefulness of 'earthing.'

At last Yekolo said "There are some matters of which it is wisest not to know," and turned away, a dreadful sickness in his heart.

I think the speed with which the generator had taken shape precipitated events. Once the rotor had been brought to rest, the three of us knelt to examine the faulty slip-rings and to discover what damage had been caused.

Some strange intuition urged me to look over my shoulder—and there stood Yekolo, humped upon four arms in an attitude of definite menace, with a fifth pointing straight at our little group. Next instant we were bathed in brilliant electrical fluid which actually crackled here in the lower cavern where Zeton's air was less ionised, and then vanished immediately to earth through the turbine-casing, leaving me

with a numbed right hand and a head-swimming doubt about what had actually happened.

Confirmation, however, came in two ways—first, a warning scream from Ella Jordan and another cry of alarm, almost as shrill, by Aldo Parsons; second, a message flashed to me over the Mattus by Yekolo in the instant that he fired. "Now I see it is true what your machine can accomplish, O Strange and Ugly One! Therefore the end of me and my race comes quickly upon us. For myself I do not care—yet there are those of my own kind to whom life, in spite of its slavery, remains dear. To protect them you must die—so!"

Only the fact that the extended Mattus rod lay unheeded on a corner of the generator bed-plate instead of remaining poised in the air saved me. As it was, the bolt expended itself to earth through the generator and turbine casings, leaving my hands feeling almost as though a cave-lobster from Hakkilon had snapped claws on the fingers. A sensitive circuit-breaker in the Mattus machine itself—a highly necessary precaution in so far as violent outside disturbance of any kind might easily ruin an operator's sanity—protected me from other harm, although a full discharge striking the instrument would have caused arcs across the terminals and, despite all precautions, smashed me into unconsciousness, probably permanent madness. Apart from this, all three of us were fully insulated by our suits.

Conspiracy must have been hatched with utmost speed and secrecy, for no sooner had Yekolo fired than seven or eight other slaves rushed to his side and commenced popping away indiscriminately at ourselves and the guards.

How Ella Jordan and Aldo Parsons—completely unprotected—escaped being singed by those blinding, blue-hot bolts, I still don't know, but they were hustled quickly through a nearby door by Zeton guards while others grabbed Hartnell, Tubby and myself.

The automatic ray-filters in our helmet visors were beating a brisk but irregular tattoo. Lightning flashed and sizzled in all directions while Yekolo and his friends desperately tried to hit us.

Guards were quickly in action, however, and the entire workshop became nothing short of an inferno as the squad, with linked arms, advanced grimly, throwing out a continuous barrage as they progressed—a barrage which for sheer violence eclipsed anything the slave-workers could achieve.

It was a fearsome demonstration—yet thanks to the filter screen I saw through that scintillating haze something which set my heart pounding anew. The rebels had grouped themselves round the generator, some half-sprawling across its humped casing—and despite the concentrated barrage they still fired back. Yekolo had learned his lesson well and ingeniously. He and his fellows were deliberately using the generator's earthed frame to divert force from the six-armed guards' united bolts!

We saw nothing further of how the battle fared, for we were rushed along more corridors and flung unceremoniously into yet another of the bare little cells, while our escort hurried back to help quell the rebellion.

"Phew!" said Tubby. "That was warm while it lasted!"

"They tried to kill us!" gasped Parsons.

"Did you see how they were holding on to the generator bed-plate?" asked Hartnell, excitedly.

I nodded. A lot of things had become clearer in the last few minutes—including a full understanding of the difference between the five-armed Zetons and the six-armed variety: The ruling race was gifted with stronger electrical emanations, whereby its members could subdue the lesser breed. Small wonder, either, if seven-armed Septak and Tanara possessed correspondingly increased potentials, that they were hailed as natural leaders. The social system on Zeton was, indeed, without any question of feeble witticism, the outcome of power.

"You know," I said, "Yekolo's lot were deliberately using that generator as a shield against the guards. I saw practically every shot curve into the casing instead of going where it was intended. What I can't understand is why the Zetons don't know about earthing effects. After all, they insulate their wiring and other gadgets."

"Perhaps they haven't had trouble on a big scale down here before," suggested Tubby.

Hartnell grinned. "Down here everything's stone—but they've surely spotted how their pretty little firework effects are earthed by those metal tunnels nearer the surface. Trouble is, they don't seem able to put two and two together. I think, though, it's the turbine more than the generator that does it. Remember what I said about electricity taking the easiest path, especially when it's headed to earth? There's a clear run through the casing and the inlet pipe straight to the river—and electricity likes to find itself in water even better than in the ground." (Indeed, we heard later that certain innocent drawers of water on the river bank in quite distant parts of the city had received unexpected shocks.) He turned to Parsons. "You probably know the course the river takes . . ."

Parsons merely shook his head and looked vacant. "I don't understand. All I want is to get out of here."

"Well," said Hartnell, with a definite air of finality, "we're not going to do that yet."

The girl, hitherto standing slightly apart from our little group, gave an exclamation of surprise. "You mean you actually could if you wanted to?"

His nonchalant, airy gesture was little short of masterly. It wasn't entirely for Ella Jordan's benefit, either, because both Tubby and I raised incredulous eyebrows. "Oh, yes, any time we liked. Didn't you see how the Zeton relay system works? What do you think would happen if I took a couple of loading coils from a beryllium hand-torch and used a battery to induce a high-voltage shock along the wire leading from the button outside the door to the power-house?"

I caught my breath. I hadn't the faintest idea whether such a scheme was feasible or whether Hartnell merely wished to impress us all for some reason best known to himself. But the plan certainly bore the Hartnell stamp of audacity—for as soon as the controlling Zeton slave experienced that prodding shock he would immediately signal for power to be applied sufficient to open the door.

"That's wonderful!" said the girl, round-eyed with

admiration. "That's wonderful! But why don't you start . . . ?"

"The reason is—we've a job to do first. We'll think later about getting back to the ship."

She shrugged helplessly and echoed Parson's words: "I don't understand . . ."

Parsons, stimulated by possibility of escape, looked up. "It's all right for you! You're safe inside those suits. What about me? I won't stand a chance if they start shooting . . ."

Typically self-centred, he made no reference to Ella Jordan. "You mean," she said, "it's part of your job to stay in danger deliberately? Perhaps to give your lives? But that's . . ." She paused, incredulous. "I mean, self-preservation's the strongest thing in the universe. Human beings can't be expected to . . ."

Few people outside Inter-X failed to be baffled by this—understandably so until it becomes impressed upon them that we have a rigid code of duty once summed up in archaic slang by Harknell as "Get back with the gen—regardless!" The final word in that phrase is vital—regardless of personal safety, regardless of comrades, if necessary; sometimes regardless of alien creatures abandoned in dire straits.

First, however, we had to get the 'gen.' Most times the task could be carried out with leisurely boredom; infrequently, as now, we found ourselves surrounded by unearthly perils. But an occasion might well arise, even during our present trip, calling for utmost ruthlessness. No sentimental obstacle must be placed in the way of duty. If necessary, Aldo Parsons and the girl would have to be left behind on Zeton; in different emergency, Hartnell or Tubby or myself would take the peeper—and the information—back to *Old Growler*, abandoning others of the Inter-X expedition to whatever fate might befall them. I thought with some solemnity of men now lying in odd corners of galactical wastes who had already made such sacrifice in the task of adding to the sum of human knowledge.

Parsons may have read something in our expressions. I don't believe much in accidental telepathy and the Mattus was switched off. But for some reason he suddenly fell on

his knees before us in slobbering supplication, grimacing horribly in selfish fear. "Don't leave me here—let's get away while we're safe—get me away . . ."

"Stop snivelling!" said Hartnell, towering over him as a tall, lean, brown figure. "Climb on your feet and start thinking less about your own miserable neck!"

I don't know how this unpleasant scene might have developed. We were saved from further embarrassment, however, by sudden reappearance of the Zeton guards. They halted, waiting, in the semi-circular doorway and I produced the Mattus rod once more, not without certain qualms. I flexed my fingers, to which normal feeling had now returned, and hoped there wouldn't be any more shooting in my vicinity.

"Come," said the captain of the guard. "You are all called to the presence of Septak."

"All of us?"

"Yes."

From the corner of my eye I saw Aldo Parsons, looking exceptionally sheepish, climb from his knees. Then began yet another procession along those strange stone corridors until at last we passed through the largest door we had so far encountered and which, strangely enough, instead of being fan-shaped, slid open horizontally, revealing a great, ornate ante-room covered with weird carvings and brilliant illumination tubes.

I had little doubt that the threshold we had crossed marked the beginning of Septak's ceremonial domain, for we had noticed previously how rooms and corridors varied in their lighting and furnishings according to their utilitarian value. The portion of the underground city we now entered, however, bore no resemblance in its sheer elaboration to anything we had seen before. Nor did the theme of decoration do anything but confirm Hartnell's theory that the Zetons bore relationship to the electrical sea creatures of Earth, for patterns of marine plants became distinguishable here and there among the curiously wrought buttresses and pilasters which lined the hall. For some mysterious reason the Zetons

preserved ancient links with their original element, if only pictorially.

We entered the main hall before full preparations had been made. Various squads of servitors—six-armed, not five-armed, so that I imagined slaves were forbidden to enter these sacred precincts—engaged themselves in moving aside great partitions of metal, presumably to divide the cavern temporarily into smaller compartments when the place wasn't needed for large-scale ceremonial purposes. These huge plates moved on swivel-casters of glass-like substance, rumbling like dull thunder until they came to rest flat against the walls, opening out before us vista after vista of the vast salon until it seemed that every set of them must surely be the last.

Hartnell, of course, showed particular interest in the constructions. When he thought the guards weren't looking he tried a tentative shove at the end of a nearby partition, and the expression on his face as it crashed into its neighbour made Tubby laugh aloud.

"Suffering Sirius!" he said. "Either they weigh next to nothing or they're balanced beautifully on the castors. Why, they must be forty feet high and half as long again!"

The experiment ended in guards hustling us to a spot where we couldn't interfere with anything.

At last, from various side entrances, Zetons commenced to hump themselves into the hall, first in scores, then in their hundreds. They came in never-ending streams—by platoons, battalions and regiments—until at last they almost entirely filled that huge cavern, leaving visible before us a wide lane of approach across polished stone inlaid with weird patterns.

A great deal of incomprehensible pomp and ceremony ensued in the distance and while rows of acolytes raised writhing arms in mysterious, rhythmic ritual, yet another partition moved slowly aside, revealing Septak and Tanara squatting on their respective thrones—huge cubes of chased malachite which must have weighed fully three tons each—surrounded by great numbers of councillors.

We were peremptorily hauled into line, flanked by our guards, as though for official inspection. Pairs of stalk-

suspended eyes swung in our direction by thousands, forming a silent, non-committal scrutiny so alarming that I felt the hair start to prickle in the nape of my neck. Even more creepy, however, was the way those eyes wheeled inexorably to maintain their focus while we were being shoved forward along the cleared path to the thrones occupied by the seven-armed co-rulers of Zeton.

After what seemed to my rather fevered imagination like a forced march across some smooth, interminable desert, they halted us some ten paces distant.

"Well," said Hartnell, cheerfully, "there they are, bless their voltages! Wonder what they've got on their minds."

We were not left long in doubt. The Mattus brought strong distinct communications from Septak as, at the same time, he balanced himself on three arms and employed the remaining four in beating the air to address the assembled multitude, although his remarks were really intended for ourselves.

"Our technicians—such as have survived the treacherous and dastardly attack of the workshop slaves—inform us that your first experiment shows promise," he announced. "We have been very impressed. Now it is the wish of a majority of our councillors that you remain here and demonstrate to us your skill in building many larger and better generators, that we may harness the power of the river and remain independent of the services of those ungrateful ones. For the present, therefore, until time arrives when your labours may commence, it is our wish that you become our honoured guests."

I picked on the unguarded point in his pompous sentences. "May we, then, not begin work immediately?"

"Trouble from the slaves persists temporarily. Their rebellion cannot last long, however. Until order is restored and the main workshop is available again, everything which Zeton can supply for your comfort is at your disposal."

I sensed Tanara's sneer. "Honoured guests!" His hatred of us remained implacable. I remembered, too, that Septak himself had referred to "a majority of our councillors," so that Tanara undoubtedly had a measure of support. I hoped

there wasn't going to be more trouble. We had enough on our hands already.

"Moreover," continued Septak, "we have been greatly impressed by the immunity lent you by the strange casings in which you clothe yourselves. Reports from witnesses in the workshop encounter infer that neither a deliberate bolt from one of the slaves nor discharges of considerable violence by our guards affected you in any way. On the other hand, the man Parsons—who is encased in quite different garments—has previously found himself stricken unconscious by quite negligible voltages. We deduce, therefore, that this clothing diverts electricity from your bodies. Is this true?"

There seemed no point in denial. "It is true," I admitted.

I imagined him nodding in gratified fashion, as though confirmation was no more than he expected.

"When order is restored, then, you shall also show us these marvels, that we may have additional defences against those who have turned upon their benefactors. Meantime, prepare plans for manufacturing these protective coverings in a style suitable for Zetons, with two special casings built to the stature of myself and Tanara, who, you will observe, possess seven arms as evidence of our strength and nobility."

As though I could possibly have missed this fact, he heaved himself backwards and forwards on the throne, lifting his limbs one by one to facilitate my calculations.

"What's all this arm-waving about?" demanded Hartnell, over the inter-com.

"Yekolo and his friends are proving rather more of a handful than anticipated. Septak very kindly says we can live a life of luxury and ease at his expense until the guards manage to straighten things out."

"How nice of him!" said Tubby, sarcastically.

Anyway, there seemed no more for me to say, and so we were led once more across the great hall, with those thousands of stalk-propped eyes still focused upon us, although this time not as obvious captives.

Eventually we found ourselves installed in a series of small, inter-connecting rooms where Zeton slaves scurried about with

their queer gait, setting out tables and stools obviously manufactured hurriedly but with excellent workmanship. There were also couches stuffed with some soft, springy and exceptionally comfortable material. The entire quarters were delightfully warm and well lit by small, luminous tubes set in niches round the walls.

"Well, well!" said young Hartnell. "And all this is ours to command?"

"Better than that filthy place where I lived so long," whined Aldo Parsons.

"I wonder if they'd bring me some warm water—lots of it—in a bowl?" inquired Ella Jordan, hopefully. "I haven't had a really good wash for what seems like months."

The Zeton whom I buttonholed was not a particularly intelligent specimen, but when I had laboriously made our wants known the various requirements arrived speedily, five-armed servants with quite a procession of trays and bowls.

I lent Ella a comb and a tube of lather-cream, with which she retired to her own room, smiling gratefully.

"Well," said Hartnell, "I think I'm going to get out of this confounded suit for a time and rest my weary bones on this very inviting couch."

"Think it's safe? Suppose the battle spreads to this part of the city?"

"We'll hear 'em coming, Pop, never fear."

And with that he turned on his side and fell into a dreamless slumber. I wished I had his gift of detachment in such circumstances.

Tubby was obviously thinking on much the same lines. "How's he do it?"

I shrugged. "Temperament, I suppose. Look here, each of these rooms has got a door leading into the others and also one to the corridor. Are we locked in by any chance?"

We were not, and to prove it I pressed each of the queer little levers several times. What the controlling Zeton in the power-house thought I don't know—if he thought at all, that is—but he fulfilled routine efficiently and without argument, making the fan-shaped doors slide easily to and fro.

"Ah!" said Tubby, in sudden understanding. "You're wondering what's likely to happen if the power-house goes out of action."

Aldo Parsons, appalled by such possibility, commenced to moan again. I took him firmly by the elbow and indicated young Hartnell. "See him? Now why don't you get down on your own bed and forget your troubles for a little while?"

Finally, Tubby and I had to escort him personally every step of the way, what time he whimpered, "Not human, I tell you—he's not human!"

"Sometimes," I murmured thoughtfully, "I'm inclined to agree with you!"

Fortunately Parsons didn't hear—thereby averting much tedious explanation—and soon we had him safely installed.

Back in our own rooms we met a transformed Ella Jordan. Sufficiently striking in appearance when we first saw her, Tubby's eyes lit up anew as she stood before us with raven hair shining blackly in the soft illumination and her smiling face aglow. Torn and travel-stained clothing, although still smudged here and there, had somehow achieved a semblance of smartness and I was glad that young Hartnell still slept, for we had difficulties enough without possibility of romantic complications.

The last couple of Zeton slaves departed, having left on our table bowls containing further quantities of that revolting soup. Viewing them rather queasily, I shared out my remaining food tablets, after which we separated.

At last alone, I prepared to follow Hartnell's example and take off my atmosphere suit. The Mark VII and Mark VIII models are not too distressing to wear for long periods, but it makes a refreshing change to experience freedom after a matter of several hours, apart from conserving oxygen.

I took a long drink of water from the service-tube connected to tanks in the pack—Zeton water, while reasonably palatable, is brackish—and was in the act of slipping off my helmet when yet another servant entered. He carried—of all things—more soup.

Feeling this to be something like the last straw, I shoved

the helmet into place again and switched on the Mattus in order to tell him precisely what I thought of that concoction.

Then I saw his stalk-like eyes to be concentrating upon the Mattus and as soon as the extending receiver rod reached operating point I knew that it was—Yekolo!

CHAPTER NINE

“NOW WE’RE FOR IT—THE MATTUS HAS GONE!”

Had Yekolo been able to understand raised eyebrows he would surely have read amazement in my expression. Whether such an emotion as astonishment was alien to him I had no means of knowing. The impression I received merely conveyed satisfaction in a successful quest. He had located me.

“Ah,” he said. “It is the Understanding One.”

“How did you find your way here?” I asked.

“I have friends among the palace servants.”

“But the risk——”

He shrugged mentally. “I and my kind have nothing to lose save our lives.”

I decided to get down to business. “Why seek me out? Am I not one of those who, by constructing a generator, may cause you to lose your lives?”

His stalk-like eyes regarded me steadily. “I came to thank you.”

He recognised gratitude, then? But for what?

“We have driven the guards from many workshops. The battle is now joined on corridors two levels beyond. In some places we have penetrated to the third level.”

I wondered, rather uneasily, on which level our present quarters were situated. “You expect to overcome your masters, in spite of their greater electrical potential?”

“The fight will be long,” said Yekolo, gravely. “Yet your teaching has given us hope of vengeance upon the tyrants.”

“Our teaching?”

“The theory of ~~earth~~ing. You saw how it saved our lives

from the guards' bolts after I so rashly fired upon you in the workshop." Remorse rushed strongly over the Mattus. "I thought you had betrayed us. Now I realise I was wrong."

Undeserved gratitude invariably embarrasses me. "Tell me about the battles——"

"Many guards have exhausted themselves firing at metal sheets we pushed before us along the ground. The charges passed harmlessly to earth. When the six-armed ones are powerless, even a five-armed slave can easily despatch them."

I thought of corridors dotted with heaps of smoking, quivering tissue, similar to what we had seen in the execution clearing, and felt rather sick.

"But there are more of the six-armed Zetons than yourselves. They will bring reinforcements."

Yekolo's glee was obvious. "Perhaps they will find it difficult to arrive in time. We have already put two power-houses out of action! Over a great part of the city guards are trapped behind doors they cannot open!"

I thought of Tubby's warning. "But these doors here——"

"They will continue to operate, have no fear. We do not wish to alarm Septak and Tanara prematurely. If developments occur too quickly for me and the situation changes swiftly, pull the lever twice in succession. Then the power-house will know it is a friend who signals." He moved towards the corridor. "Now I must depart. In some respects matters have gone a little wrong and I must attend to them. All being well, I will see you again later."

With that he went. I flung off my suit and in a new-found ease lay back on the very comfortable bed. Physical ease, anyway. For the rest, my mind was busy admiring Yekolo. It was nice of him to walk calmly into the heart of Septak's domain for the purpose of thanking me, but if I myself had started a full-scale rebellion and something had "gone a little wrong" I don't think I'd waste time carrying bowls of soup around.

I thought of the great battles raging underground, where it would obviously be inviting death even to stick one's head round the corner. That foretaste in the workshop could have

been nothing save a harmless firework display by comparison. I wondered about the five-armed Zetons' chances of victory. How long before the guards adopted similar shielding tactics against electrical bolts? Suppose the battle developed into physical grappling when voltages became exhausted on both sides? Would six arms also prove stronger than five in such primitive conflict?

Then I fell asleep.

I woke from a dreadful dream of struggling with six-armed guards to find Hartnell shaking my shoulder.

"Shake off this slothful slumber, Pop, you old rascal," he said, cheerfully. He grinned. Knowing his ways my heart sank, fearing the worst.

"What's wrong?"

"Parsons—he's gone. So has the girl."

"Gone?" I stared in bewilderment. "Gone where?"

"Who knows?" said Tubby. I squinted from my other eye and saw him standing at the end of the bed.

"Think something's happened to them?"

"If it hasn't already," said Hartnell, grimly, "it certainly will if they run into a skirmish between some of our little friends. They haven't even got a suit to help 'em."

"That's right," I said, sitting up and stretching a hand for my own equipment. "Anyone who——"

I paused, dumbfounded. The suit was not where I'd left it.

We stared at one another in wild surmise. "This is more serious than just losing an atmosphere suit," I said. "In fact, now we're for it—we've lost the Mattus!"

"Parsons, of course," said Hartnell. "He's been howling all the time about how nice and safe we are inside our suits. But the girl—well, I'd never have thought that of her. Only goes to show you never can tell with women."

"She didn't give the impression of liking Parsons all that much," reflected Tubby, "although I noticed she flew to the defence pretty quickly when Hartnell told him to stop snivelling."

"No doubt the maternal instinct or something," I said, profoundly.

Hartnell drew a deep breath. "They've been marooned here together long enough to forge a bond of sorts, even if its only being mutually sorry for themselves."

"Good-looking girl, too," said Tubby, regretfully. "Imagine her properly dressed in civilised surroundings and you've got one of those stunners that seem to make the orchestra stop playing when they walk into a restaurant."

I tore myself with reluctance from such contemplation. "Well, there's two simple items on the immediate agenda (1) the suit's gone (2) we've got to get it back—for the sake of the Mattus if nothing else."

"You know, Pop," said Hartnell, slowly, "I don't think it's safe to go very far without a suit. If the battle's rising from level to level all the time they may soon be skirmishing round these parts. One near miss from a lightning bolt while we're not wearing suits and . . ."

We chewed this over with some solemnity.

"Best thing to do," he went on, "is for you to borrow my suit and then if——"

I cut him short. "That's the second time!" I said, meaningly. "First you wanted to help me with the Mattus when affairs looked a bit sticky—now you want me to take your suit, leaving you naked to the blast, as it were. You getting the maternal instinct too?"

He laughed awkwardly.

"I was careless enough to lose the confounded suit. I'll go around without the thing till I get it back," I said.

Bravely the words were spoken. I didn't feel very brave really. I thought of Yekolo's hint about his friends having infiltrated into the ranks of palace servants. Suppose some of these, fancying themselves as martyrs, decided to connect themselves in series and loose off at Septak or Tanara with their combined strength? What would happen to anyone who happened to get in the way accidentally? Since time began, the lot of the innocent bystander has been hard.

Tubby swung the discussion to a more practical plane. "Where do you think they've gone?"

I shrugged. "Probably trying to make their way to the ship. It's the only place they can be safe."

"The ship?" Hartnell let out a squawk like a wounded hydra-bear from Grasha II. "Blazing Betelguese! Don't you realise there's a spare key in your suit-pocket? They'll try to fly *Little Growler* away—leaving us here for good!"

In the light of this appalling possibility, we dived simultaneously for the door.

"Yekolo!" said Hartnell, with sudden inspiration. "He could find out for us through his friends."

I hated to quash his enthusiasm. "Without the Mattus we couldn't ask him."

Tubby yanked the lever. The door remained firmly closed.

"Looks as though the oppressed have thrown off their chains."

I snatched the piece of metal twice in quick succession. Yekolo's organisation was nothing if not well-drilled. The fan-shaped segments slid smoothly and swiftly to the floor under the impetus of unseen slaves clinging to some copper bar in the depths of the captured power-house. A second later we stood—alone—in the corridor.

"Now what?" asked Tubby.

"If they're heading for the ship," I argued, "they'll try to reach the surface. All we can do is to follow any ramp we see leading upwards."

The trouble was that our path into the lower regions of Zeton had been both irregular and bewildering. Truth to tell, we hadn't the slightest idea of the city's topography and that trip on Septak's private underground railway served to confuse the issue thoroughly.

Expecting every minute to meet Zetons round corners or to perceive the electronic haze of deadly conflict at the end of corridors, we pressed on as best we could. Personally, walking the dim passages—where at least lights still functioned—in my uniform I felt very much unclothed and vulnerable. Every time I looked at the helmets of Hartnell

and Tubby as I followed them from the position in our little procession where they had pushed me for safety's sake, I thought how my own head seemed bare and prominent—an unmistakable and easy target for any Zeton who cared to fire in our direction.

Thus apprehensive, we came at last to a large, deserted hall where several doors gave access to corridors leading in widely separated directions. "Well," I said, helplessly, "What do we do now?"

"Eeny-meeny-miny-mo!" counted Hartnell, making a frivolous choice according to incredibly ancient and childish ritual. His hand came to rest pointing at a door on our left. It might as well be that way as any.

But while I was in the act of operating the door, sudden commotion sounded behind us—a soft, slithering patter of Zetons moving across the smooth stone floor. Wheeling in alarm, I counted seven of them and my heart threw a double somersault until I saw that each possessed only five arms.

"Hope Yekolo's spread the good word about us," muttered Hartnell.

Apparently he had. One of the Zetons came across to us and only by utmost self-discipline did I repress a shudder of disgust and apprehension as an arm groped round my wrists and waist. He was searching for something, and subjected Hartnell and Tubby to similar and longer investigation.

"The Mattus!" I gasped. "He's looking for the Mattus! Yekolo must have told him about it!"

Bereft of the professor's invaluable apparatus, we remained hopelessly in the dark. The situation was solved by the Zeton grabbing Hartnell and leading him in the desired direction.

"Press on," said Tubby, "and ask your lucky stars to arrange that we don't run into any guards. You're in front!"

Either all the guards had been summoned to battle areas or Yekolo's colleagues had chosen their route carefully. Every corridor we traversed—and we were moving rapidly for fully ten minutes—proved empty, but at length our escort halted outside one of the many doors and operated the lever. It swung open to reveal more five-armed Zetons, and for all I knew

Yekolo himself might have been among them. But most astounding of all was the presence of Ella Jordan!

She ran to meet us with cries of relief mingled with distress.

"Oh, they found you! I didn't know whether I'd made them understand! I didn't know what to do . . ."

"What's happened? Where's Parsons?"

She made little moaning sounds. "He's taken your suit and the machine that helps you talk to the Zetons——"

"I wouldn't be standing here like this if he hadn't!" I snapped. I'd endured a lot in the past twenty-four hours and I don't seem able to withstand nervous strain so well as I did in younger days.

However, the girl's next remark shook us to the core. "He's taken it to Septak. He's going to strike a bargain with him—his own freedom in exchange for leaving you here so that the Zetons can force you to teach them all the electrical technicalities you know!" She flung herself to the floor at my feet, clutching my knees. "He's going to take your ship! Oh, please stop him! Please—I don't want to be left here on this awful planet——"

I raised her gently, placing a finger beneath her chin to lift her tear-stained face. "Don't worry! I'm sorry I was irritable. Now how can we locate him?"

No one knows what thoughts passed through the minds of the Zetons as they stood watching this encounter, but at least they made no move to interfere, even when Ella Jordan volunteered to lead us personally to where she thought Parsons might be.

"Highly dangerous," commented Tubby. "You'd better stay here. No telling what hot spot we might walk into."

Somewhat recovered, the girl tossed her head. "Can you think of any other way? I can't give you directions——"

Hartnell, eyeing her with decided admiration, said "Come on then. Can't afford to waste time."

Unemotionally, the Zetons watched us go. After all, I thought comfortingly, we seemed to be accepted by both sides as neutral parties. The five-armed Zetons apparently echoed Yekolo's gratitude for our accidental demonstration of how

to take the sting out of the guards' bolts; the six-armed variety accepted Septak's edict that, in hope of learning about generators and insulating suits, our status must be that of honoured guests. Unless we ran into a battle area, neither side ought to harm us.

True enough, not a creature save ourselves stirred in the labyrinthine corridors. An ominous, unbelievable stillness hung in the electric air. Every available Zeton must have been engaged in the struggle raging on lower levels. None appeared anywhere during our journey, and finally I began to recognise the surroundings, mainly by intricate decorations. We were back near the quarters allotted us as Septak's guests. Except for having contacted Ella Jordan we might have saved ourselves the trip.

So far we had progressed in silence, each occupied with his or her separate and far-from-pleasant thoughts. At last the girl spoke. "This way. I've got a good idea where Septak lives."

Naturally, whatever reserves had been flung into battle, private squads guarding Septak and Tanara remained at their posts. Four of them stood, solid and forbidding, outside an ante-room door. I anticipated a little difficulty, but surprisingly enough they promptly snapped the door open as we approached.

"Wonder if Septak realises how highly honoured he is?" murmured Hartnell. "You know, Yekolo's not so dumb, leaving the power on here to lull their suspicions."

"Hope he doesn't have it turned off suddenly while we're inside," I said.

We saw Aldo Parsons immediately upon entering. With an impudence that made my blood boil he strutted round in my suit—my suit, mark you!—holding the Mattus rod handle as though it might be some royal sceptre. He didn't even cringe when I walked across to him, and a gloating expression shone in those horrible, bloodshot eyes. The tables were turned, apparently, and Parsons meant to wring from the situation every ounce of evil glee.

"Who's master now?" he crowed. His words came clearly

over the external amplifier, so he had obviously been experimenting and familiarising himself with the suit's controls. Through the transparent morynium facepiece his lips could be seen writhing in grimaces of vindictive satisfaction. "Hartnell," he went on, his voice cracking with fury, "you once told me to stop snivelling. Now I'm going to have the pleasure of seeing you snivel for a change. You'll learn something of what I went through! I've made a deal with Septak and Tanara. They know you can build generators—now they want to find out how much electricity the suits can stand!"

"You devil!" breathed Ella Jordan, knowing what was coming. "You inhuman devil!"

I looked to the other side of the room, where both Septak and Tanara stood motionless. They must have guessed the trend of Parsons' harangue—direct translation was impossible because he held the Mattus rod still retracted—but were content silently to study our reactions.

"Tell 'em to try out their little tricks with the one you're wearing!" said Hartnell.

"No fear!" said Parsons, with an insane cackle. "I've already persuaded 'em to try it out—on you!"

CHAPTER TEN

DANSE MACABRE IN AN EXECUTION CELL

They took us from the room, pursued by Aldo Parsons' mocking, vengeful laughter, and thrust us away in separate cells. The situation seemed admirably summed up by the last words young Hartnell spoke as we set off in enforced procession. "Funny how quickly things alter, Pop, isn't it? Only a little while ago we were honoured guests. And now . . ." The guards pushed him inside and the fan-shaped doors swung into place.

The cell in which I eventually found myself contained no table, no comfortable bed—not even a bowl of that dreadful soup. I felt depressed and awfully alone. What had the

Zetons in store for Hartnell under Parsons' insane promptings?

From time to time I strained my ears, but all seemed silent as the grave. As the grave? Now what mischievous space-demon could have put that ominous phrase into my mind?

I remained prey to melancholy thoughts for a long, long time. Possibly I dozed, sitting in a corner on the hard floor and sadly missing the cushioning effect of my stout Bergmann suit. I remembered how Parsons was at that very moment polluting it with his presence and felt my rage boil up anew. I wondered what they were doing to Hartnell.

Sudden opening of the door swept away this tumult of confused doubts and uncertainties and brought me bounding to my feet in alarm. Two Zeton guards humped themselves into the cell and hauled me along the corridor to where quite a large crowd had assembled outside the room in which Hartnell was imprisoned. Seeking desperately, I failed to locate any other human being—neither Tubby nor Ella Jordan nor even Aldo Parsons.

The door opened. From where I stood against the corridor's far wall I could see across the press of grotesque Zeton bodies into the cell. Hartnell lay prostrate in his distinctively coloured suit, propped upon a strange contraption of supporting slats fashioned from some plastic material. My throat became constricted with horror at the realisation that this cradle could be nothing less than an insulating device, arranged to support Hartnell's body while it was subjected to high voltage discharges. But why were they so viciously cruel as to fetch me as a witness? And where was Tubby? Had they already subjected him to experiment?

Five Zetons linked arms and fired in concert. The blast was frightening. Bolts from the outstretched arms struck with colossal power, making the prostrate figure bounce momentarily on the slats, while a dim, blue haze flickered through the open doorway and spread ionisation along the corridor.

Examination showed that the suit had not been pierced. Several Zetons hopped inside to make close inspection, waving

their arms vigorously. I wondered why Hartnell remained prone and unprotesting. Drugged, perhaps? The transparent facepiece precluded possibility of any ruse, for I could faintly see outlines of a pale countenance behind the morynium.

Seven guards combined forces for the next attempt. The dazzling shock seemed multiplied out of all proportion to their numbers, and exhaust flashing into the corridor set my hair on end with electrical excitation. Again Hartnell flung himself several inches into the air as the bolts struck.

There could be only one explanation—the gay, young devil-may-care with whom I had shared so many years of companionship and adventure in strange corners of space was already dead. Unfeelingly, the Zetons were continuing their attempts to ascertain breaking point of the suit's insulating properties.

I struggled helplessly in the guards' grip. I wanted to rush into the room, throw myself across that prostrate form and sob out the grief which so coldly filled my heart. Inter-X men had died before and they would also undoubtedly die in the future for what we proudly considered a noble and worthwhile labour. Now it all seemed futile and the achievements of Inter-X no more than a heap of ashes. Nothing—not even the fate of worlds sailing across far-flung galaxies—could possibly be worth the sickening price that we had just paid.

Now fourteen or more Zetons—my tear-blurred eyes could not count them accurately—linked arms in the little room, pumping colossal and repeated lightning bolts at short range into that helpless figure until it convulsed after time in a macabre and horrible dance of death and the entire scene as last became blotted out by flashes whose brilliance burned itself into my very brain.

I don't remember much more except raising my head once to see the cell clear of ionisation. A scorched, ragged hole had been ripped near the right ankle of the suit. Somewhere, I supposed, was another, marking the entrance point of the fatal bolt.

Septak and Tanara materialised to wave stalk-like eyes gloatingly over the scene and to indulge in animated arm-

waving. The speed-gamma pistol had disappeared with my suit, of course, or at that moment, holding strictest regulations in complete contempt, I would cheerfully have levelled it at the pair of them and pressed the trigger. As it was, they spared me no glance but lolloped with their retinue along the corridor.

The guards carried me—exhausted but still blaspheming and struggling—back to the original cell. They threw me bodily across the threshold and I passed out.

Over me hovered a face—a girl's face, bearing an expression of profound concern. As my eyes opened wider and my senses shook off languor born of physical and mental exhaustion, I recognised her for Ella Jordan. Beside her stood Tubby, still wearing his atmosphere suit, and somewhere in the background a Zeton, at the sight of whom I instinctively recoiled.

As I sat up the girl's features became smoothed of anxiety and Tubby sighed hard with satisfaction. "You had us worried, Pop," he said. "We didn't seem able to wake you."

And when I recollected what I had seen previously, there swept over me a desperate feeling that perhaps it would have been better had I slept for ever. Not the least tragic aspect was breaking the news to Tubby, yet what was to be gained by temporising? Better get it over, I thought.

"Listen," I croaked, in such a tone of hollow, abject misery that they stared anew. "Listen. I—I don't know how to tell you—Hartnell—he's——"

"What about him?"

"He's—he's dead!"

I saw his pink, round face inside the helmet turn suddenly pale and haggard. "Dead?"

"They used him for experiments on the suits! They made me watch!" I shuddered anew at the horror of that scene, etched indelibly on my mind. "They fired at him time after time—more and more of them—till the suit broke down! There was a big hole burned near the ankle——"

"Oh!" said Ella Jordan, flinging a hand to her mouth.

"Dead?" repeated Tubby, unbelievably. "When was this?"

I didn't know. I'd had other things to occupy my mind than looking at watches. "Soon after they took us from the big hall and shoved us in three separate cells."

He replied with a wordless exclamation of mingled fury and grief.

In the moment of silence which followed I looked again at the Zeton. He had five arms. Could it be Yekolo or merely one of the servants? Without the Mattus I didn't see how we could find out. I jerked my head. "Who's he?"

"We think it's Yekolo. He opened the cell doors and let us out. We've only just come here."

I climbed to my feet. "We've got to find Parsons. If we don't get the Mattus back we're sunk. We can't do a thing without it—not even ask Yekolo to help us." I looked at the Zeton, who merely stared back from his expressionless, stalk-propped eyes.

"Come on, then!" snapped Tubby. "If we can't make him understand anything else, at least he can prevent us straying into the battle areas."

"I'm not bothering so much about that," I said, "as straying into some of the guards!"

He smiled wanly. "Does it matter—now?"

I shrugged, knowing how he felt. Yet in spite of everything there remained our duty of returning with information to Inter-X—an obligation which transcended the most vital personal considerations.

Ella Jordan looked at us with sympathy and part-understanding. "You'll—you'll both miss him——"

What could we say? I walked across to the door, followed by the others and the Zeton.

"We'll try every door we see along the corridor," suggested Tubby. "I don't think the power's off yet, judging by the way others opened just now."

"And if you don't mind," I said, "I'll stand well back with Ella when you press the lever. Something might loose

off at us unexpectedly—and I still feel rather undressed without a suit."

Meanwhile, Yekolo—if, indeed, it was he—had been showing unmistakable signs of bafflement and distress. Nothing could be done about it at the moment, however, and as soon as we reached the corridor he set off at high speed in the direction we imagined led to the surface.

"You don't think he means us to follow?"

"He's not waiting for us, anyhow," said Tubby. "Let's go this way."

We tried door after door, every time finding the little rooms empty. On occasions we merely obtained access to corridors leading we knew not where and which we hesitated to enter.

Thus vainly seeking, we came at last to recognisable surroundings—lavishly-decorated passages giving access to Septak's palace.

"I don't like this," I said. "Bound to be guards hanging around."

"Funny we haven't met any so far," muttered Tubby. "Better not go any farther."

A feeling of utter helplessness swept over me. I tried to contemplate the situation realistically. Here was the moment when we must admit failure. Nothing remained save to abandon our quest at this point and try to reach *Little Growler*.

"You're right, Pop. No sense in wandering for ever through these corridors. They're bound to catch us sooner or later."

And so the decision was made. Ella Jordan, I think, knew what an effort it cost us. The Mattus was really a minor matter and as far as we were concerned Aldo Parsons—having deliberately made the choice of throwing in his lot with the Zetons—possessed no valid claim to rescue. Our real, unspoken desire, of course, was to retrieve Hartnell's body, so that we might at least have the satisfaction of seeing it eventually laid in a place of honour in the sacred garden allotted for the purpose in the great, wooded park surrounding the Inter-X headquarters building.

"Come on, then," I said, in a low voice. "Back the

way we came and see if we can get out of this horrible place."

Even Zeton's fearful sky, with its eternal electrical tempests, seemed preferable to dim-lit labyrinths where bright death might lurk beyond every corner. At least, in the quieter air beneath that raging canopy, we would know freedom of movement and space in which to observe the approach of danger.

Luck rather than judgment guided us again to the hall where Yekolo's friends had come upon us earlier. Still we met no Zetons, five-armed or six-armed. The quietness was definitely sinister to our strained imaginations.

Standing in the centre of the hall, my eyes stung with unbidden emotion as I recalled how young Hartnell had prepared to make a childish, random choice of route.

"We can't do better than follow any of them that seems to lead upwards," I said. "Let's try this for a start."

Once more we were fortunate. Having lost all idea of depth in our original, bewildering descent, the only guide to position lay in bareness of the walls. All decoration was absent from where we now groped along a rough stone tunnel, occasionally noting with pleasure that yet another ramp provided further opportunity of climbing.

"I don't recognise the place," remarked Tubby, "but we can't have much farther to go."

"We've been lucky, haven't we?" said Ella Jordan, breathing more quickly with the additional exertion.

We had, indeed. I couldn't understand why everywhere remained deserted. Only explanation which came to mind was that this particular thoroughfare was used rarely by Zetons in comings and goings between the surface and their grim underworld.

And while my mind was occupied with such useless speculation they were upon us again with a sudden scurry and soft patter of arms humping across the stone floor, taking us by surprise from the rear. I heard Tubby's warning shout blend with an alarmed cry from the girl in the same instant that my wrist was tightly seized.

But simultaneously came a measure of relief. If orders had gone out for our extinction the Zetons would not have bothered to seize us—they would have fired on sight, knowing that Ella and myself remained unprotected against their bolts of lightning. And while there was life there was hope, as poor, young Hartnell so often said while grinning deliberately into the face of danger.

Then it became evident that my wrist was held in a grip intended to restrain rather than subdue. Turning, I saw that the Zetons were five-armed—and straightway experienced a wave of relief which ridiculously enough left me weak and trembling.

"It's Yekolo's pals again!" I said, happily.

"Well, I wish they wouldn't do it!" complained Tubby. "My nerves are in a bad enough state without being grabbed in the dark all the time!"

Ella Jordan voiced the question we both considered superfluous to utter. "Where are they taking us now?"

We didn't know, and without the Mattus machine weren't likely to find out until we got there.

Yet another journey commenced through the rough stone corridors of Zeton's labyrinths, and for fear we might at some future time need to find our way unescorted to the point where we had been intercepted I tried mentally to check the route. Not much success attended my efforts, but at least one factor of comfort emerged—at no time did the path descend. What particular level were we on? How far had we climbed above the battlefield?

The escort halted us before a door at the end of a narrow, semi-hidden corridor. A double jerk at the operating lever swung the segments swiftly downwards. Upon the threshold stood revealed yet another five-armed Zeton whom I had no hesitation now in recognising as Yekolo.

And beyond him I saw something that froze my feet to the floor. Petrified by astonishment and disbelief, I stood there goggling helplessly with eyes bulging and mouth hanging open idiotically, unable to utter a single word.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BATTLE OF THE DOUBLE WALLS

For there, on a primitive bench made from a few pieces of untrimmed timber knocked hurriedly together, sat Hartnell, smiling all over his lean, brown face.

"I don't believe it!" I said at last, made giddy by the shock. "I don't believe it—you're dead!"

His grin grew from ear to ear. "Want to bet, Pop?"

"But I saw them!" I protested. "They fired at you time after time—more and more of them . . ."

Tubby shoved past me unceremoniously. "It's incredible! How did you do it?"

"When they'd finished," I pressed on, remorselessly, hammering out every single aspect of this fantastic occurrence, "there was a damned great hole burnt in the suit . . ."

Young Hartnell "tut-tutted," shaking his head reprovingly. "Now, now, Pop!" He even wagged a finger. "Language! Lady present!"

"I'm so glad, so glad!" exclaimed Ella Jordan. "After what we'd heard . . ." She looked at me rather curiously I thought.

I gave up. "I don't know what happened—only that I'm immeasurably relieved to see you again. But, you know, there really was someone inside that atmosphere suit—your suit, young Hartnell—when they loosed off the lightning at it. Who was that?"

His grin faded to be replaced by a stern, forbidding expression. "It was Aldo Parsons!" He turned to me, features as hard as granite. "Do you think he got any more than he deserved?"

I drew a deep breath, seeing for the first time my own suit on the floor beside Hartnell's feet.

The girl spoke for both of us. "No! I used to be sorry for him. I'm not now, though. He was hateful—hateful . . ."

In the silence that ensued I felt my mind grow dizzy with speculation. How had Hartnell escaped? In what manner had Aldo Parsons worn his suit?

"Well, come on, come on," said Tubby, with justifiable irritation. "Tell us how it all happened."

Hartnell's narrative threw new but not entirely unexpected light upon the characters of Zeton's co-rulers. Surprisingly enough, I wondered why it had not been impressed upon me before how strangely the working of Septak's mind resembled human thought-processes. While he bore us no particular affection, there had been, for instance, his immediate seizing upon the point that our electrical knowledge could be of exceptional value and later, when this was proved, his ingratiating insistence upon our assuming the status of 'honoured guests.' Not, probably, particularly desirable human characteristics, but nevertheless understandable to a certain extent.

Tanara, on the other hand, had never made any secret of hatred for us, and his acknowledgment of our existence could have occurred only at Septak's special request. I had little doubt which of them first agreed to Aldo Parsons' insanely vengeful suggestion.

"Septak, I gathered, changed his mind," went on young Hartnell. "You know I don't like to boast . . ."

"Oh, no," said Tubby, sarcastically, "nothing could be more foreign to your essentially modest nature!"

" . . . but he seemed to think I might be more useful to the Zetons than Parsons. He even hinted at a sort of poetic justice—using Parsons for the experiment with the suit instead of me."

Neither Tubby nor I was deceived about Hartnell's dilemma at that time. The position must have been highly unenviable—yet what could he do?

"What could I do?" echoed Hartnell. "I tried to talk Septak out of it without actually begging him to use me instead of Parsons, but he was so tickled with the idea . . ."

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "What do you mean—'tried to talk him out of it'? How could you?"

Apparently Septak's sudden and appalling decision had struck Parsons paralytic with fear. As soon as he was convinced—entirely against his will—that the Mattus was working accurately, the man had broken down completely, babbling out the Zetons' intentions to Hartnell with panic-stricken incoherency and pleading to be saved from the devastating consequences of his own evil spitefulness.

"I dragged him out of the suit so that I could have a go with the Mattus myself," said Hartnell. "He was sobbing and blubbing all the time. It was horrible. I had—literally—to manhandle him into my own suit. He thought he'd be safe there, in spite of all the Zetons could do. It was like trying to put clothes on a hundredweight or so of boneless meat."

He told us some of the suggested alternatives he made to Septak in the hope of saving Parsons' life—and even if Hartnell hadn't been my friend I would willingly have agreed that no one could have done more—but the Zeton remained adamant. Personally, I was thoroughly grateful to Septak.

"I didn't tell Parsons the result, of course," Hartnell continued. "I simply daren't. I can't say whether he guessed or not when they hauled in that queer-looking cradle gadget, but he suddenly staggered against me and I saw through the helmet-visor how his lips had turned a horrible blue colour. I think he was dead before the Zetons grabbed him and laid him there ready for the test. Must have been a heart attack brought on by sheer terror."

Ella Jordan stood holding clenched hands straight down by her sides, knuckles white with tension. "Don't spare any sympathy for him," she said. "He wasn't worth it. Going like that was better than he deserved."

Yekolo and his friends, meanwhile, had been standing patiently. "Better get your suit on again, Pop," said Hartnell. "I don't think Parsons can have contaminated it too much. Ask how the war's going."

While I struggled into the apparatus, he went on: "There's not a great deal more to tell. Before any fun and games started they hustled me out of the place and shut me up in another cell quite a distance away. Then Yekolo found me and brought me to this hide-out while he tried to locate you."

Tubby shook his head admiringly. "That lad certainly seems to get around. Marvel how he does it—and him running a battle at the same time."

With the Mattus headpiece lying coolly in position against my forehead and the extended receiver rod in my hand, I felt more like my old self. Undoubtedly my first duty, on behalf of us all, was to express gratitude to Yekolo. This I did.

"Our debt to you is greater, O Strange and Ugly Ones," he insisted. "Final stages of the battle swing rapidly in our favour, and already Septak is no more."

At first I thought there had been some misunderstanding.

"Septak dead?" demanded Hartnell, incredulously. "Are you sure?"

"Craven guards tried to barter their own lives for that of their master," said Yekolo. "Septak died with dignity. Afterwards we also killed the guards themselves." Ethics, so far as they existed on Zeton, were apparently simple and elastic. "They did not expire with such composure."

"It's right," I told the others. "Septak's dead. Pity it wasn't Tanara!"

"Our victory, as I said before," continued Yekolo, "was engineered by your strategy. Truly, O Ugly Ones, are you creatures of great knowledge and ingenious tactics."

We didn't deserve such credit, but I couldn't very well throw back his bouquets in his teeth, so to speak.

"Now you should go quickly, if you so desire, for all is not yet safe on Zeton and many guards remain free."

"How far to the surface?"

"One level above us lies the ground. I and my friends will escort you to the last door, and there we must leave you. Much detail demands our attention."

I could well imagine. Nevertheless, some five-armed Zeton spared time to attend to an odd detail on our own behalf,

for he came in at that moment tugging behind him—Hartnell's suit!

Quick repair outfits are included as normal equipment for Inter-X squads, of course, for although the Bergmann suits are fairly tough, occasional tears in the material are inevitable. (More surprising, really, is that they do not occur more often, considering the rough treatment these suits must necessarily withstand.) Air leaks are apt to be embarrassing in places where poisonous gases lurk, and many an Inter-X man has had cause to bless the fact that reparation is possible in a very short time, noxious fumes meanwhile being excluded from the suit by turning up oxygen pressure.

So we slapped a couple of patches on places where Zeton current had scorched through the material and soon we were ready to depart.

At the door, beyond which lay open countryside, Yekolo paused to say more appreciative things. "Go with the blessing of me and my kind, O Ugly Ones." He harped on this quite a bit, but I suppose he meant no real insult. "The machines you have showed us how to build and the theory of electrical science you have imparted shall enable us to operate our city without slavery. Someday, perhaps, you will return, and if victory proves to be ours it shall be a happy and prosperous Zeton that you then behold. And now, therefore, farewell!"

A secret signal to the power-house with his own arm and the final door barring our way back to *Little Growler* swung open, allowing light from Zeton's flaring sky to blaze once more in our faces. Then the fanwise segments slipped back into place.

"To think," said Tubby, "that I should ever be glad to see those fireworks again!"

Ella Jordan breathed deep of ozone-filled air. "I think they're one of the grandest sights I ever laid eyes on!"

We set off with light hearts along a track leading from fringes of the city's strange maze of surface tunnels to wooded areas beyond which the peeper lay. From time to time among the trees we saw buildings the purpose of which was a mystery

—and, frankly, one which we had no intention of investigating.

“Won’t be long now,” said Hartnell, cheerfully. “A smooth take-off, a quick dash through the electron clouds—and we’re there! Shouldn’t take more than ten hours or so to pick up *Old Growler* and they’ll give us a radio-locator beam as soon as we’re outside the . . . here’s another of those metal buildings. Wonder what they’re for.”

As it happened, we never found out—although shortly afterwards we acquainted ourselves hurriedly with the interior of one nearby.

Tubby spotted the guards first. They were running in long lines from several of those outer doorways to the underground city, moving swiftly and with obvious military discipline to intercept us. The girl gave a little whimper of apprehension, but otherwise stood with us bravely. Our eyes swung from side to side, weighing up possibilities.

“Better separate,” said Hartnell, with quick decision. “One of you take Ella; the other two can try to divert ‘em.”

“You go, Pop,” said Tubby. “We’re a bit faster on our feet.”

I shook my head. “Your films are worth more to the controller than anything I can tell him by word of mouth. I’ll go with Hartnell.”

He opened his mouth to protest, but seeing the force of my argument, closed it again. “Come on,” he said to Ella. “Can you run as far as the ship?”

She smiled at him and they trotted off together obediently.

Personally, smiling was the thing farthest from my mind as I watched the Zetons taking up formation before closing in upon us.

“Along this track, Pop,” said Hartnell. “Dive well down behind the bushes to baffle ‘em a bit more. That lot out to the left will have to wheel round if they want to cut us off—and they can’t do that and chase Ella and Tubby at the same time.”

I obeyed willingly. There are times when young Hartnell’s

judgment puts my allegiance to severe test, yet somehow this never occurs in times of physical emergency. I suppose he possesses a natural genius for generalship.

Anyhow, I saw his point in the present situation, noting with some satisfaction that our path also offered a chance of reaching the cover of a building in case the guards moved too fast for us.

"How's it going?" I asked Tubby over the radio.

A sound of panting come from the inter-com. by way of preliminary reply. "Not too badly. They're catching up, though, and I don't think Ella can run much farther."

"Then turn up the gravity-reactor and pick her up and carry her," said Hartnell.

"You know," said Tubby, in annoyed surprise, "I never thought of that!"

For quite a long while we dodged and zig-zagged through the undergrowth, trying all the time to work round the outermost line of Zetons to a point where we might set off in the others' wake.

"O.K.," reported Tubby at last. "They've called off the chase—and we can see the ship. You all right?"

"We'll follow as soon as we can."

"Take care of yourselves," he said, anxiously. "Our lot are obviously going back to help the others catch you."

"Well," said Hartnell, "that's that. Two of us are safe, anyway."

"If we don't escape the drag-net now we won't stand much chance when the other Zetons get back here. I expect they've given up chasing Tubby because they think a couple of birds in the hand are better than two in the bush, as the old proverb says."

He grinned. "Well, we're still in the bushes, aren't we?"

Which was just the sort of foolish remark anyone might expect of Hartnell at such a time, but I bit back a suitable comment because a row of Zetons suddenly popped up about eighty yards in front of us, causing a hurried retreat.

As might be imagined, outnumbered to such an extent we stood no chance of penetrating the cordon.

"Into that building!" I gasped. "We can just make it before the others rush across the clearing!"

And make it we did, by the skin of our teeth. Precious seconds were wasted trying to find out how the door worked. These structures, lying somewhat remote from the city, had no lighting tubes or automatic entrances. Finding no lever, we scrabbled desperately at the segments with our fingers, eventually wrenching them open and slamming them shut again while the foremost Zetons were still forty or fifty yards distant. One or two of them tried long-distance shots. Fortunately, the range was too great, but I stared in horrified fascination as the electric flashes moved straight towards us before curving downwards to discharge themselves in the earth.

"Well," said Hartnell, "here we are, safe and sound."

"For the moment," I amended, pessimistically.

I looked round the building. It was quite a large structure, fully a hundred and twenty feet long and maybe fifty wide. The high walls—of similar metal to the city's surface tunnels—were surmounted by a hooped roof.

At first, however, we failed to observe its full extent because the place remained divided into smaller temporary rooms by more huge, glass-wheeled partitions like those we had seen in Septak's council chamber.

Several minutes, therefore, we spent in running round these partitions to locate doors and fortify our retreat, because the Zetons could obviously pull open the segments unless precautions were taken. Whether a bundle of stout metal rods we found were actually meant for the purpose I don't know, but they certainly served to jam the doors very efficiently from the inside, and not until all was secure did we pause for breath.

"These partitions," panted Hartnell, as we slammed bar after bar into the movable doors, "are going to be useful. They'll make pretty good shelters when the Zetons start firing."

Light entered the building through various circular openings, roughly twelve inches in diameter, set low in the walls.

No six-armed starfish could obtain entrance by this means—but there was nothing to prevent lightning bolts being fired into the interior.

"I wonder they haven't started some sort of fun and games," muttered Hartnell, with sudden uneasiness. "What are they up to, do you think?"

"Let's look out and see."

He chuckled. "All right, so long as we don't find ourselves staring face to face with a Zeton."

I wished he hadn't mentioned this possibility, for such an instance of ill-chance never entered my head. It was with infinite misgiving that I slowly peeped round the rim.

Fortunately, we were able to breathe more easily almost immediately, for all the Zetons—and there was quite a large assembly of them—engaged in a council of war in the cleared space between building and undergrowth. Then, suddenly, a dozen or more broke away, revealing in the centre of the assembly—recognisable by his seven arms and greater bulk—none other than Tanara.

Fourteen Zetons advanced in single file and as they linked themselves one to the other by joining arms I perceived their deadly intention. Combined voltages of such a number had been sufficient to break through the insulating properties of a Bergmann suit; now having cornered us, Tanara prepared to exploit the results of that horrible experiment.

"Look out!" I warned Hartnell. "Let's dodge behind these partitions. They worked for Yekolo, why not for us?"

Outside the building that grotesque procession of nose-to-tail guards moved silently from one aperture to another, trying to locate us. I knew that the instant we were observed a great flash of electrical discharge would illuminate the place for an instant with terrifying bluish glare, seeking its intended target before leaking away to earth.

Twice I glimpsed an arm hovering beyond the port-hole, while revolting double antennae swung in slow, deliberate quest. On the third occasion they saw me and fired. Electronic blast shot past my head as I flung myself to com-

parative safety behind the movable wall. I actually saw the main bolt hit the partition and vanish into the metal.

And in the same incredibly short space of time I mentally remarked upon a strange fact. Why should the screen absorb electrical energy when it was insulated from earth by those large, glass castors?

"You all right, Pop?" asked Hartnell, not without anxiety.

"He missed me. But tell me why these screens . . ."

And I explained my query to him.

Silent Zetons still played a cat-and-mouse game outside. Their nerves—probably stretched by Tanara's enraged promptings and the thought that the five-armed slaves' vengeance hung perilously over their heads—were as taut as our own. Twice they slammed in full-power discharges without any result save to make us sweat a little more with apprehension.

Then Hartnell flung caution to the winds and yelled in triumph. "A condenser! Good old Pop! You've got the answer!" He laughed aloud and danced in sheer delight. "Now let 'em look out! Come on, help me shift these partitions!"

Completely puzzled, I demanded explanations, nevertheless not expecting any. I wasn't disappointed. I'd known Hartnell in his present frame of mind on previous occasions.

"I hope you know what you're doing," I said, with a heavy sigh.

Under his instructions, the movable partitions were pulled round end-to-end so that they formed a kind of inner wall to the building, resting a couple of feet from the external metal. The total length proved insufficient to provide a complete lining to the big room, but the remaining portion fortunately left no port-hole uncovered.

Twice again during the proceedings the Zetons blasted away with accumulated energies; twice more they were unsuccessful, except that when I touched one of the charged partitions little blue sparks rolled leisurely from my arm along the surface of the suit and disappeared into the ground from

my boot-toe. Already mystified and apprehensive, this didn't improve my morale at all.

"Good!" said young Hartnell, at last. "Now we'll go round dropping some of these metal bars across the foot of the partitions to make connections—the castors'll prop 'em quite nicely—and our pretty little booby trap's complete!"

"I only hope it doesn't catch us instead," I said, morosely.

It was soon obvious that the guards were beginning to lose their tempers. Hartnell foolishly risked a glimpse outside and reported that fully thirty were linking themselves together for the next assault. When they fired I could well believe it. The most frightful flashes and crackles scattered in all directions across the interior of the building, with sheets of electron dust flying vividly from the partitions and whirling upwards to disappear in the roof.

"Stand well clear, Pop. Right in the centre of the room."

"Don't worry," I said. "I'm getting as far as I can from that outside wall. In a minute I'm going to lie down and hug the ground."

He merely chuckled. "It shouldn't be long now."

Six times more the Zetons fired. Tension stretched across the room almost in a literal, physical sense. Blue haze appeared inside our atmosphere suit and once again I saw tiny sparks playing among Hartnell's hair.

Nothing happened for a short time after that. Small lines of worry creased Hartnell's forehead and, despite my pleading, he risked another peep through a port-hole.

He returned in a happier frame of mind. "Here it comes, Pop. Tanara's leading the procession in person this time. His seven arms ought to turn the trick all right!"

"But what's the idea?"

"Ever heard of an electrical condenser—you know, the things they use by the dozen in radio sets? It's a gadget that stores up current for a short time. When it's nearly full it discharges completely at the slightest provocation. Principal parts are small metal sheets laid face to face and separated by air, mica or some other kind of insulator . . ."

"You mad young fool!" I said, aghast. "So you've built

a huge condenser here! It's charging itself from the Zetons' bolts! And we're standing in the middle of it!" Despite every effort, I heard my voice rising to an indignant squeak.

He nodded brightly. "That's right, Pop. The inner wall's insulated by those glass castors. And didn't you notice that the outer wall's kept clear of the ground by a sort of plastic foundation? The more power they pump in the bigger the potential that's going to build up in both walls."

I felt my hair slowly lifting itself by the roots. "And then?"

"Either some careless so-and-so's going to touch the outside wall and trigger off the main charge through himself to earth—or the next bolt they fire will tip the balance of capacity and they'll have the whole lot blow back in their faces!"

I didn't have long in which to anticipate this dreadful occurrence. Without warning, one of two giant, invisible hands squeezed the breath out of me; the other, forming itself into a fist, struck me violently in the back of the neck.

When whirling bright stars faded and I opened my eyes again, Hartnell was in the act of rising to his feet. Smoke curled from somewhere between the partitions and the outer wall. Eyeing this with grim satisfaction, his lips stretched into a mirthless smile. "I hope that's taught 'em a lesson!"

The clearing outside was littered with bodies of charred and motionless guards. In the distance we saw Tanara—the only one still moving—limping pitifully away. Even as we watched he collapsed, twitched his seven arms in dying convulsions and lay still.

"Inter-X can prevent us from using speed-gammas on intelligent life," said Hartnell, with unwonted solemnity, "but they can't stop evil things from encompassing their own destruction."

"And we, of course," I said, sarcastically, "had no hand in it."

I've mentioned before the effect of sarcasm on young Hartnell. "No hand at all," he said, blandly. "It's what our superstitious ancestors would have called the inscrutable workings of Fate." He paused. "You know, Pop, I think

Yekolo and his friends are going to make a good job of building their new world."

He looked at the flickering sky and sniffed deeply through the helmet test-valve. "Somehow the air seems clearer already," he said. "Come on, let's get back to the ship!"

THE END

*All characters in this story are fictitious and imaginary
and bear no relation to any living person.*

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